

OPERATIONAL CODE: AN EVALUATION OF THEORY
AND A CASE STUDY OF DAVID BEN GURION

BY

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of individuals, particularly those who occupy upper-level political offices, has become increasingly important in the field of International Relations partly because of the increasing personal involvement of the upper-level policy-makers in the decision-making process.¹ While the individual level of analysis has been recognized for some time (Simon, 1947; Snyder, Bruck and Sapin, 1954, 1962; March and Simon, 1958), the theoretical literature has traditionally given greater attention to the properties of states or collectivities and to the attributes of global or regional systems. This emphasis has not been misplaced in so far as some characteristics of international politics can be more adequately explained at the level of states or systems without the introduction of any variables concerning the individual policy-maker and his perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behavior. As Verba has observed:

. . . the introduction of variables dealing with individual behavior would complicate the model without commensurate payoff in terms of increased understanding and prediction. This would be true if the impact of individual decision-making on the behavior of nations in their relations with other nations were slight, or if the impact varied randomly (because, for instance, of idiosyncratic factors) among the population of international events that one was trying to explain. (Verba, 1961, p. 93)

¹Personal involvement in decision-making has been exemplified by Summit Conferences, "Shuttle Diplomacy", etc.

However, as recent studies have revealed (Kaplan, 1968; Ball, 1974; Yanarella, 1975) there are severe limitations to such traditional models. Verba points out that those models which either ignore or make grossly simplified assumptions about the individual decision-maker may yield imperfect explanations and a large residual variance which could be attributed to the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behavior of foreign policy decision-makers. For example, Wilkenfeld attempted to explain foreign conflict behavior on the basis of the following predictor variables: the amount of conflict directed to a state by other states; the domestic scene; and prior conflict behavior (Wilkenfeld, in McGowan, 1973). The percentage of unexplained variance ranged from 28% to 77%. Rummel (1963), Tanter (1966), and Haas (1968) attempted to explain foreign policy behavior on the basis of the attributes of states, for example, the relationships between domestic-conflict variables and foreign-conflict variables. In each of the studies only internal relationships between the variable sets were found. That is, relationships were found between the domestic-conflict variables or between foreign-conflict variables, but not between domestic-conflict and foreign-conflict variables. In Rummel's study the variables could account for only 45.8% of the variance.² The question thus becomes whether or not the residual variance can be attributed to random or systematic components. If it is the former, then the theories are good but the measures are poor. If it is the latter, then the traditional models do not account for all of the variance and the theories (reasons) are misspecified. Wilkenfeld speculated that the unexplained variance may be accounted for by the personality attributes of the leaders. Other studies also suggest that idiosyncratic and personality variables may account for the unexplained

²See Greenstein and Polsby (1975, Vol. 8) for a complete analysis of the different studies. See also Jones and Singer (1972).

variance. Recent empirical studies by Holsti (1967, 1972), de Rivera (1968), Janis (1972), Jervis (1976) and Steinbruner (1976), indicate that there are definite circumstances under which analysis of beliefs will provide a powerful explanatory tool for explaining behavior. In fact, Shapiro and Bonham hypothesize that beliefs of decision-makers may indeed "account for more of the variance than any other factor." (Shapiro and Bonham, 1973, p. 161).

The above argument, if valid, points to two conclusions. First, there is a need to better understand the cognitive processes and beliefs of decision-makers so that foreign policy behavior can be more adequately explained or predicted. Second, any approach which seeks to explain behavior of decision-makers on the basis of their beliefs and cognitive processes, must satisfy the requirements of systematic research as well as specific standards of theory building, and it should be relevant to the political phenomena under investigation. The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate one such approach, Operational Code, in line with these requirements and to test its relevance in deriving those beliefs which affect political behavior by means of a case study.

The Operational Code was formulated by Nathan Leites in his study of the Soviet Politburo and the Bolsheviks (1951, 1953). The Code referred to the set of beliefs the Bolsheviks had about the nature of the universe and politics. Alexander George (1969) synthesized the many facets of Leites' work into a comprehensive framework by identifying five philosophical or epistemological beliefs and five instrumental beliefs which are at the core of an individual's perspective of the nature of politics, history and the social environment. These beliefs permit an individual to organize and simplify what may be "a confusing array of signals picked up from the environment by his senses." (Holsti, 1977, p. 3). The beliefs which comprise the Code are not

a fortuitous, unconnected set of beliefs rather they are concerned with the central and fundamental beliefs of political life. (Holsti, 1977, George, 1978b). The argument is that the central beliefs will display those qualities and consequences that influence decision-making more than those secondary beliefs which occupy a peripheral role in a cognitive belief structure.³ George asserts that the construct should be parsimonious enough to yield an economical guide to research, that it should yield a large number of assumptions which are likely to be salient in any decision-making situation and that it avoids the pitfalls of over-determination. In addition, if the beliefs have to be stable over time, then one should be able to predict the presence of the salient beliefs in a decision-maker's belief system and one should be able to set out propositions and predictions concerning the impact of those beliefs on policy outcomes.

Operational Code makes a distinction between the Philosophical Beliefs and the Instrumental Beliefs. The Philosophical Beliefs are assumed to be "ends" desired by the decision-maker and the Instrumental Beliefs are the "means" for obtaining those "ends". The Philosophical Beliefs deal with the beliefs one has about the political universe and the Instrumental Beliefs deal with the strategies and tactics one employs to achieve one's goals and aspirations. Should there be a change in the more central "ends" there should be a compensating change in the less central elements of the configuration. For example, David Ben Gurion believed that a Jewish Israel was the most immediate goal prior to 1948. Once the State was established, it was then merely a means to the fulfillment of his ultimate goal--the end of Zionism.

The structure of the ten beliefs included in the Operational Code can be set out as follows:

³ Holsti (1965) examined John Foster Dulles' beliefs using the George construct and found that the ten questions did address themselves to the more fundamental rather than to the more peripheral beliefs.

Philosophical Beliefs

1. What is the essential nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's opponents?
2. What are the prospects for eventual realization of one's political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic or pessimistic on this score? And in what respect the one and/or the other?
3. Is the political future predicatable? In what sense and to what extent?
4. How much "control" or "mastery" can one have over historical development? What is one's role in "moving and shaping" history in the desired direction?
5. What is the role of "chance" in human affairs in historical development?

Instrumental Beliefs

1. What is the best approach for selecting goals and objections for political action ?
2. **How are goals** of action pursued most effectively?
3. How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled and accepted?
4. What is the best "timing" of action to advance one's interest?
3. What is the utility and role of different means of advancing one's interest?

Proponents of Operational Code stipulate that there are two theoretical premises regarding the role that Operational Code beliefs may be expected to play in the decision-making process. First, "beliefs of this kind influence decision-making indirectly by influencing the information processing tasks that precede and accompany the decision-maker's choice of action. Second, such beliefs do not unilaterally determine his choice of action; other variables are also at work in determining what he will do." (George, 1978b, p. 11-12).

Information processing tasks include defining the situation, searching for relevant material, evaluating the material, and selecting one or more of the possible alternatives for formulating the policy outcome. It is assumed that a decision-maker's Operational Code beliefs will influence all or some of these tasks during the decision-making process. For example,

We assume (and available empirical evidence of an impressionistic kind supports the assumption) that an actor's image of the opponent. . . is particularly important in shaping the actor's definition of the situation, particularly as regards his assessment of the threat posed by the adversary's behavior in that situation. A general image of one's opponent as fundamentally hostile encourages the actor to define situations of interaction with that opponent as posing dangers to the actor's side. (George, 1978b, pp. 12-13).

Heradstveit's (1978) study of Arab and Israeli Elites found that if the image of the opponent is hostile then ambiguous information (which may lead to a variety of interpretations) is more likely perceived as evidence reinforcing the image of hostility. Discrepant information is ignored or disregarded enabling elite members to maintain consistency within their belief systems. Thus, information search and retention is bounded by a decision-maker's belief system. For example, the general predispositions or beliefs a decision-maker has about the enemy will tend to limit his search for evidence to that which is consistent with his established belief patterns. This, in turn, will affect the choice propensities which lead a decision-maker to choose one course of action over another. For example, it may be that a decision-maker who is very optimistic about obtaining his goals (Philosophical Belief 2) will tend to choose optimal goals (Instrumental Belief 1) and to pursue those goals by limiting the means rather than the ultimate ends (Instrumental Belief 2). While it is unlikely that a decision-maker would choose a course of action that does not reinforce his beliefs, the beliefs themselves must be analyzed in terms of the situation or circumstances confronting the decision-maker. In short, his perceptions of that situation are important attributes of an Operational Code approach.

The second premise of Operational Code is that the beliefs themselves are not the only determinants of an actor's policy actions. A decision-maker may be influenced by structural, situational and systemic variables, by national interest, domestic constraints, bureaucratic and personal pressures.

If the system is relatively open, allowing the decision-maker to evaluate and act on information "independently on its own merits and in accordance with the inner structural requirements of the situation" (Rokeach, 1960, p. 58), it may be difficult to discern the weight of the Operational Code beliefs in relation to other variables which are present in a given situation. If the system is relatively closed, limiting search to that information which is consistent with the established belief patterns, then the beliefs contained in the system will tend to be the dominant or the most powerful factor in evaluating the situation and processing information. To the extent that the decision-making system operates under conditions of uncertainty, complexity, stress or crisis, decision-makers may be limited in making decisions on the merits of the individual situation. Under such conditions the influence of beliefs may become greater. In order to discern the impact of beliefs on decision-making it may be more fruitful to concentrate on those processes which precede a decision than on the actual policy outcome.

While most research utilizing Operational Code has been consistent with the George construct,⁴ some researchers have modified the construct to "fit" their studies of political and historical leaders. For example, Anderson's analysis of Senator Arthur Vandenberg, (1971) contained the argument that the George construct failed to provide a complete spectrum of a decision-maker's political beliefs. Anderson therefore added a third

⁴See for example, Holsti, 1967; (John Foster Dulles); McLelland, 1971; (Dean Acheson); Stupak, 1971; (Dean Rusk); Johnson, 1973; (Senator Frank Church) Tweaser, 1973; (Senator William Fulbright); Nossal, 1976; (Chaing Kai Shek); Kavanagh, 1977; (Ramsay MacDonald); Walker, 1977; (Henry Kissinger).

set of questions which relate to a decision-maker's views of the contemporary international political universe.⁵ Heradstveit (1978), on the other hand, concentrated on one image--that of the opponent--in his assessment of Arab and Israeli elites. Two other researchers, White (1969) and Ashby (1970) each compared the Operational Codes of two political leaders drawn from the same political environment.⁶

The existing research on Operational Code does lend credence to the assertion that the ten beliefs are interrelated. For example, support has been found for the premise that Philosophical Belief 1--the view of the political universe and the image of the opponent--is a dominant or "master" belief, in that any change in the status of this belief appears to require some psychologically-compensating change in the status of the other beliefs within the Operational Code structure. The overall result of the studies which build on the George construct is that they are only weakly cumulative in that they tend to be "uneven in quality and none is a wholly adequate model." (Holsti, 1977, p. 41). As Holsti observed, there has been a lack of uniformity in the meanings attached to the belief-types comprising the Operational Code and in the evidence used for an empirical evaluation of these beliefs. In order to identify the most salient dimensions of each belief and to systemize the rules for data collection, Holsti revised the Operational Code construct to allow for a more quantitative and rigorous analysis. My evaluation of the Operational Code framework, in this thesis, will employ

⁵Gutiérrez (1973) followed the Anderson revised construct in his analysis of Dean Rusk.

⁶White examined the Operational Codes of Mao Tse-tung and Liu Shao-chi. Ashby examined the Operational Codes of Willy Brandt and Kurt Schumacher.

Holsti's revised scheme. It will address itself to several key questions, including the following:

1. What are the theoretical foundations of the Operational Code?
2. What criteria does Holsti employ to examine the belief system of decision-makers? Do they go beyond a systemization of existing research?
3. What kinds of evaluation of theory can be drawn from a case study application of Holsti's framework?
4. Overall, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the Operational Code?

Given the nature of International Relations theory and the relative lack of systematic research at the level of individuals, the Operational Code offers a very attractive approach, at least at first glance. However, the quality of theory subsumed by the approach must be evaluated. Therefore, Chapter One will be devoted to two basic tasks, namely: (1) a description and an evaluation of explicit criteria for theory construction and comparison; (2) an evaluation of the Operational Code in terms of those concepts and relationships which figure prominently in comparable theories of decision-making. Regarding the first task, the criteria which will be put forward as standards of evaluation include: units and levels of analysis; parsimony; linkages and predictive value. With respect to the second task, the Operational Code will be evaluated in relation to other theories, specifically Consistency theory, (Abelson, et al, 1968), dissonance theory, (Festinger, 1957, 1964), cognitive mapping, (Axelrod, 1976), and a cybernetic theory of decision-making, (Steinbruner, 1976).

Chapter Two will build on the theoretical discussion in Chapter One and it will evaluate Holsti's Operational Code construct, the coding manual and code rules. This chapter will examine the theoretical and methodological problems which may be inherent in the construct. The methodological assessment will center on content analysis and the related problems of reliability and validity.

Chapter Three will utilize Holsti's framework for a case study of David Ben Gurion, the former Prime Minister of Israel. Briefly, the justifications for a case study are: the revised Holsti framework has yet to be used extensively; additional case studies enhance the cumulative nature of theory development; case studies assist in the examination of theoretical criteria; and comparative studies enhance the development of typologies of foreign policy decision-makers. Ben Gurion was selected for the case study for several reasons. Ben Gurion possessed many characteristics which make him an excellent candidate for Operational Code analysis. For example, he had high ego-esteem. He was dynamic and charismatic. More importantly, throughout his leadership situations of uncertainty and stress were commonplace. As I noted previously, situations of uncertainty increase the possibility that the personal beliefs and cognitive processes of the leader will be influential in the decision-making process.

Chapter Four will examine the strengths and weaknesses of Operational Code based on the case study and on the evaluation of theoretical concepts carried out in Chapter One. Finally, the conclusion will suggest possible additions or deletions to the construct which will strengthen the theoretical base of Operational Code.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

There are many studies of cognitive approaches to foreign policy decision-making. The underlying premise of all the cognitive approaches is that a simple "black-box" formulation (Singer, 1961)¹ provides an insufficient explanation of the variables associated with decisions. Further, cognitive model proponents assume that the manner in which a policy-maker forms perceptions, selects options, diagnoses situations, and engages in political behavior, is strongly linked to the "content and structure of belief systems, information processing styles and strategies for coping with stress" (Holsti, 1977, p. 28) particularly under conditions of uncertainty.

The diversity of the cognitive process models can be described briefly under several headings: scope, theoretical categories and concepts, data and analytical procedures. As Holsti has noted in his review of the cognitive process literature,² there is a marked overlap in the manner in which theoretical concepts are applied in the various models. For example, the Operational Code refers to a decision-maker's beliefs about the political universe,

¹Singer describes "black-box" formulation as the misleading assumption which denies or discounts any discernable differences among nations as actors and thus presents a highly homogenized image of nations.

²Holsti presents an excellent overview of the diverse nature of cognitive process models. (Holsti, 1977, pp. 27-34).

whereas Brecher (1973) refers to an "Attitudinal Prism" and a decision-maker's "world view".³ In addition, the models tend to be weak in their ability to account for the variable nature of the situation which may affect the impact of cognitive processes on choice behavior. For example, the amount of stress, the attainment of goals, the degree of uncertainty, have effects which must be explicitly evaluated. (Holsti, 1972; Axelrod, 1973; Holsti and George, 1975; Steinbruner, 1976).

An extensive application of cognitive approaches to foreign policy decision-making has been inhibited by major theoretical and practical problems. Holsti identified the most severe difficulties as:

. . . disillusionment with some of the previous efforts of related kinds; skepticism about the relevance of psychological theories, insights and evidence to analysis of political phenomenon; the canon of parsimony; problems linking beliefs to foreign policy actions; difficulties of access to data, the labouriousness of coding and related methodological problems. (Holsti, 1977, p. 6).

An additional inhibition is found in the appeal of the traditional rational models, although as the personal attributes of leaders become increasingly influential in foreign policy in such areas as "shuttle diplomacy" and summit conferences, the limitations of the rational modes are becoming more apparent. The question then becomes--what are the limitations, and how can cognitive models overcome these limitations and supply a more powerful explanation of foreign policy behavior?

Limitations of the Rational Models

While the image of the "unitary rational actor" is still powerful recent discussions of decision-making have criticized the core requirements of the

³Putnam (1973) refers to "central" or "primitive beliefs" (Rokeach, 1960) as "cognitive predispositions".

of the rational models. Researchers have found weaknesses in the basic assumption which is that foreign policy is best conceptualized as a series of rational choices, that is, choices being made after all the possible alternatives and consequences in a given situation have been considered.

Rational models assume that decision-makers are rational human beings who have perfect knowledge of all events and information relevant to the decision situation. Further, it is assumed that they are capable of calculating all the possible alternatives and the consequences attached to each alternative and establish a preference ordering (utility function) from which the most preferred consequence is selected. (Simon and March, 1958). Perfect knowledge and the elaborate calculations required by the rational decision-maker are unlikely. Individuals do not, in fact, make decisions in this manner. As Verba (1961) has noted, decision-makers deviate from a means-ends rationality model for several reasons. First,

. . . individuals do not have a clear set of the value preferences that exist independently of the situation and can be matched against a variety of alternatives to see which gives the best value outcome. Instead, one's values depend in part upon the situation one is facing and which is attainable in that situation. One's preference can change during a decision process. (Verba, 1961, p. 110).

This weakness becomes more evident when the rationality model is applied to group or coalition foreign policy behavior. Joint preference ordering is not only more difficult but "logically impossible" (Verba, 1961). Members of the group may have goals and preferences that conflict. In addition, the criteria for identifying goals or even the membership of the group may be imperfectly worked out. Such situations are not uncommon in decision-making organizations and rationality models are limited in their ability to explain how decisions are derived when there are inconsistent goals and preferences within the group. (Verba, 1961, p. 112).

Second, there is a weakness in assumptions concerning information acquisition. It is impossible for a decision-maker to amass information

concerning all the possible alternatives relative to any given situation. An exhaustive search for such information would not only be difficult and time-consuming but highly unlikely. Etzioni (1968) argues that decision-makers have only part of the information they would need to examine all the possible alternatives and all the relevant consequences.

As a rule, they do not even know what information would be necessary and, hence, they do not know how much of this information they hold or its validity. Nor do they have the assets or time to collect more than an additional fraction of the needed information.

The necessary calculations cannot be carried out because, first, this capacity assumes that the . . . earlier prerequisites have been met--that criteria for evaluation (or weighing of utilities) have been provided, and that information about the consequences has been made available. Second, this assumes that there is a limited universe of relevant consequences that can be exhaustively surveyed; . . . (Etzioni, 1968, p. 265, emphasis in text)

Since a decision-maker cannot consider all the possible alternatives, he tends to seek those alternatives that are "as similar as possible to past choices so that experience can be used as a guide." (Verba, 1961, p. 112). Similarly, Braybrooke and Lindblom (1963) would argue that decision-makers do not make a comprehensive search of the situation but rather, they investigate only those alternatives which differ in a limited degree from existing policies. Such a limited search will reduce the cost of information gathering and the elaborate calculations required by the rational models.

Simon (1957) argues that a decision-maker does not choose the best alternative (optimizer) and he will settle for something that will provide a satisfying alternative to achieving his goals. Should there be any difficulty with the selected "satisficing" alternative, another search is employed but at no time is the search geared to find the optimal value.⁴

⁴Etzione offers another approach to decision-making called "mixed-scanning". Briefly, the method suggests a synthesis of both a rational and instrumental approach. A decision-maker would scan the situation without expansive details and specifications and then take a bit-by-bit approach to solving the problem: The decision-maker distinguishes between fundamental decisions, such as the decision to declare war, and bit decisions, which are incremental, but set in