Thoughts on the psychology of ‘strategic communication’

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Abstract

The excitement about 'strategic communications' and 'influence' in military circles is a reflection of the rediscovery via conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that success in war is often subjective. You might not be able to spin your way to victory exactly, but in messy low-intensity conflicts, conducted amidst considerable media attention, there's often an important story to be told about who is winning - victory is about both persuading people to do things you want, and to believe things you want. So far so good. Less happily, however, there's still very little evidence-based thinking about winning those hearts and minds. Everyone has a theory, or, failing that, a catchphrase, but ideas about 'how' to communicate effectively (that is, for effect) are thinner on the ground.

In this brief paper, I argue that this is because the emerging literature on 'influence' is psychologically illiterate, drawing on the new DCDC joint doctrine note to make my case. Then I offer some suggestions as to how this deficiency might be remedied. In particular, I make the case for cognitive dissonance theory - I argue that changing behaviour may be more important than working directly on attitudes. The French counterinsurgency theorists of the 1950s understood this. Today, their coercive methods are neither plausible, nor - being corrosive to our own ethics - desirable. But gentler behavioural nudges involve framing choices may be practical and effective.

Introduction: What is Strategic Communication?

Much ink has been spilled defining Strategic Communications [SC]. Without rehashing the various arguments, it is worth, for the sake of the analysis to come, making two broad points in opening. The first is to ask whether SC is simply another term for strategy; the second is to suggest that psychology provides great conceptual utility in thinking about SC.

One of the key debates about SC is whether it is primarily about communication *of* strategy, or communication *as* strategy. If the former, then strategists decide on strategy, perhaps with one eye on how it will be perceived, and communications experts in disciplines like marketing, media relations and so forth then get on with disseminating favourable messages about the strategy. If the latter, then communications is integral and essential for all strategy - and the strategist is perforce a communicator. Communication in this sense includes not just verbal messages, but all behaviours that can be perceived by interested audiences.

In reality, much is likely to be situationally driven. A large industrial war of peer-on-peer is more likely to be settled by force of arms as much as by force of argument; but further down on the scale of warfighting intensity one moves, the more scope there is for non-violent, or more creatively violent, forms of communication to shape the success of the strategy. Here SC resembles more closely the idea of communications as strategy. Violence is itself communication, of course - and wars, even wars tending to the Clausewitzian idea of total war, are in essence dialogues between the belligerents. This much after all would be familiar to readers of Thomas Schelling.[1] But the modern idea of SC seems less germane to these sorts of wars. Militaries in the west have become efficient at conversing using the language of organised violence. Only when such industrialised violence becomes less useful in achieving the aims of strategy are militaries forced to examine more closely the relationship between their activities and the goals of strategy - which invariably involve changing people's minds or behaviour.

In these wars, all communication has strategic potential - and that is communication not just verbally, but also through actions. Indeed even a decision *not* to behave in a certain way or to verbalise a message is a form of communication. Whatever one's posture, in other words - there are strategic implications. How a combatant behaves is one side of a dynamic relationship between it and the various other actors involved in a conflict. This holistic definition of communication is the direction of travel in current UK doctrine on SC, as evidenced by the definition of SC on offer in the new DCDC joint doctrine note on strategic communications.[2] The pithy definition of SC offered therein is revealing in its view of SC as strategy. As the authors (including the author of this paper) see it, SC boils down to

> *Advancing national interests by using all Defence means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people.*[3]

But there is a risk inherent in the JDN definition. Elevated to this level, SC becomes effectively synonymous with the term 'war' itself. ‘All Defence means of communication’ clearly includes military activities - whether posturing or executing violent action.

Seen quite properly as social phenomenon, war is essentially a relationship between rival social groups. And such relationships involve communication - to convey meaning and to seek desired outcomes. Such communication is designed to further political ends. And yet if this is what SC means, it comes very close to a definition of strategy as military activity designed to achieve an end. Strategic communication, in other words, becomes, in DCDC’s definition, simply strategy.

We hear regularly, especially from strategic studies scholars, that there is a dearth of strategic thinking in contemporary British affairs.[4] It may be simply that strategic communication is one reaction to the perceived failure to 'think strategically' - that is to

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[1] See especially, for an argument about war as communication or negotiation, Schelling, T. C. (2008). Arms and influence. New Haven, Conn. ; London, Yale University Press.

[2] Defence, M. o. (March 2011). JDN 1/11 Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution. DCDC.

[3] Ibid., p. 1-1

[4] For two high quality articles making this point, see Porter, P. (2010). "WHY BRITAIN DOESN'T DO GRAND STRATEGY." The RUSI Journal **155**(4): 6 - 12. and Strachan, H. (2005). "The lost meaning of strategy." Survival: Global Politics and Strategy **47**(3): 33 - 54.

devise strategy that can effectively deliver the goals of policy. The communication part of SC then, simply serves as a rejoiner to anyone not observing the last decade of war, that violence itself is only a part of strategy, albeit an important one.

Seen this way, SC is a direct challenge to the military as the primary instrument of strategy. If SC is simply a synonym for 'warfare', or even 'strategy' clearly there is scope for the military to adjust, or perhaps even transform in order to achieve greater utility of force. Should the cadre of communications specialists be expanded and deepened, the better to advise on influence activities? Or should commanders and staffs be more widely tooled to cope with war as communications? The dilemma is reflected on the place of 'influence' within the staff college syllabus - sitting as it does in a brief phase mid-way through a year long course, and some way distant from earlier phases on strategy and operational art. In short, the British military has yet to decide whether SC is core business of its generalist officer corps, or an admittedly important activity of niche specialists. If it is core business, as DCDC's initial contribution to the SC debate suggests, then the UK military is arguably ill equipped for an activity hitherto considered peripheral to war fighting.

How to communicate strategically

The second debate about SC is about *how* strategy is crafted as communication. If we accept that war is about effecting attitudinal or behavioural change, and if the military acknowledges a need to look beyond conventionally organised violence to achieve this end, as it increasingly does when it comes to modern low-intensity conflicts in fragile states, then clearly there is a need to understand the processes through which such changes occur.

In their 2010 paper on the Future Character of Conflict, DCDC anticipated their holistic view of SC, arguing for the centrality of the 'narrative' in achieving success in future conflict.[5] No doubt this reflects recent martial performance in conflicts where the scope for military victory is proportionately small relative to the scope for attitude change to be forged by a wider range of activities. The point is essentially Clausewitzian, and robust for it. If war is limited, both the weapons on offer, or more profoundly by the extent to which the attentions and interests of the belligerents are engaged, then most wars will be less than total, and victory, in what is essentially a negotiation through violent activity, will be subjective. Where there is subjectivity, there is scope for propaganda, or less pejoratively, storytelling to be utilised in an attempt to shape individual and group understandings of complex and subjective realities.

Over the course of decades waging counterinsurgency and other low-intensity conflicts, western militaries have arrived at some broad understandings of how attitudes might be changed. For the British, the key term, of course, is winning 'hearts and minds' - an aphorism dating to the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s. Alongside that goes a settled package of counterinsurgency activities intended to achieve that aim. Key amongst these, the counterinsurgent must use minimal force, and recognise political, not military primacy. As Bennett and others have demonstrated, however, this tradition may be more of an accepted mythology than an objective appraisal of how the British military has actually behaved in low-intensity operations.[6] Nonetheless, mythology or otherwise, the idea that

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[5] Defence, M. o. (February 2010). Strategic Trends Programme: Future Character of Conflict. DCDC.

[6] See, for example, Bennett, H. (2010). "Minimum force in British counterinsurgency." Small Wars & Insurgencies **21**(3): 459 - 475.

the British successfully adopt a softly-softly approach to counterinsurgency, for example in sipping tea with local elders and wearing soft hats, remains pervasive. It is, in itself, a narrative of British counterinsurgency operations.

Part of this narrative is the theme that information operations can assist in persuading locals of the essentially benign and sympathetic outlook of the counterinsurgent. British counterinsurgents including Frank Kitson and Robert Thompson have emphasised the key role that propaganda plays in low-intensity conflict.[7] In so doing they have promoted an enduring theme in British counterinsurgency - the need for truthfulness or honesty in such communications. The Joint Doctrine Note mentions in passing the Ministry of Defence's obligation to inform truthfully, but does little to unpick the meaning of that word. A senior British officer involved in SC recently distinguished between himself and propagandists by assuring his interlocutor that whereas a propagandist lied, he stuck strictly to the truth. Truth, though, is sometimes more problematic than that.This ostensibly sensible approach to communication is somewhat naive, not least in its understanding of truth - implicitly seen here as an ontological reality rather than a socially constructed framework of meaning.

Related to truth is the idea of consistency. The strategic narrative must, DCDC urge, be crafted to ensure consistency. It does not do to be caught lying; to be discovered saying one thing to one audience and quite another to others; or to be caught saying one thing to an audience and behaving in a quite different way. 'Lack of consistency,' the authors note, 'offers incentives to our adversaries'.[8] An oft mentioned example is the tension arising in co-ordinating messages about UK deployments in Afghanistan - the UK audience might be keener to hear about the departure date than Afghans wavering in their commitment to the nascent Afghan state. DCDC urges that narratives be nested within each other, each consistent with those above them, in a hierarchy of narratives. This again is somewhat naive - governments can pursue goals that will be in tension with one another - the case of leaving Afghanistan is a perfect example. In the real world, there is more scope to say different things to different audiences, or to the same audience at different times, not least because the social groups that people belong to shape the way they interpret meanings that reach them and the amount of attention they pay to messages outside their own group.

The naivety on truth and consistency contrasts with more knowing language about the construction of a 'narrative' that one finds in the SC doctrine note. The authors write that 'Narratives are compelling story lines which explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn.' and that narratives 'must be more than a simple list of facts and may even convey an emotional link'.[9] This is promising, but glosses over the way in which narratives become compelling.

Narrative is a propagandists term for propaganda, which recognises both the construction of meaning through careful messaging, and the emotional tags associated with language and imagery. Facts are not the same as the truth - the inclusion and ommission of facts is part of an editorial process shaping the likely perception of a message. Even facts, in

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[7] See Thompson, R. G. K. (1966). Defeating Communist insurgency : experiences from Malaya and Vietnam. London, Chatto & Windus. and Kitson, F. (1971). Low intensity operations : subversion, insurgency, peace-keeping. London, Faber and Faber.

[8] Defence, M. o. (March 2011). JDN 1/11 Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution. DCDC., p. 3-4

[9] Ibid., p. 2-9

many cases are open to interpretation. The social groups to which we belong come with packages of norms that we often unreflectively apply to understand and interpret the world about us. Facts like the height of a mountain may be relatively uncontroversial, but the appropriate weighting to be accorded to justice over order, say, is a more complex judgment, made by individuals whose attitudes are shaped by their social identity. This feature of human judgment, a staple of anthropology, sociology, and, in particular, psychology, has yet to fully permeate the military sphere.

Psychology and communication

One step towards remedying the psychological illiteracy of influence literature and emerging doctrine is for the military engage more deeply with psychology and psychologists to understand how groups and individuals form their behaviour. In particular, with social psychologists, especially - but not exclusively - those who have done work on group behaviour during conflict.

At present, such engagement is haphazard. An example from my own experience in professional military education comes to mind. Military officers sometimes understand psychology in terms of psychoanalytic or personality assessments of individual key leaders.[10] But this too often amounts to *post hoc* speculation about personality leading to success or failure in particular instances. So, lessons in command and leadership too often identify the traits of individual leaders, rather than reflecting more deeply on the social context within which they act, which shapes the potentiality of their leadership.

A second interesting phenomenon has been the success of anthropological approaches to understanding insurgency in military circles. The writings of David Kilcullen in particular, but also of Montgomery McFate, and the the establishment of a Human Terrain Team programme to work on socio-cultural studies in the battlefield, has privileged anthropology as a means of contextualising and more effectively prosecuting low-intensity conflicts in poorly understood societies. This anthropological and culturally attuned approach to low-intensity warfare chimes with a particularly British perception that in days of Empire, we did things better. The politically savvy district officer, linguistically expert and a long term resident of the dusty frontier is the stuff of rosy mythology, and in some cases may even be a fair reflection of practice. Within military circles then, there is an understanding that winning low-intensity wars, fought for the support of local populations, there is a need to be culturally informed, and a perception that anthropology can help outsiders understand and communicate more effectively with locals.

An appreciation of academic approaches by those tasked with shaping military operational art and tactics is no bad thing. But relying primarily on anthropology comes with a number of tensions. First, the military is inherently a generalist organisation, whose scale means it struggles to develop extensive cultural skills, and whose expeditionary nature may see it fighting in the Balkans one year, and Afghanistan two years later. Cultural knowledge developed in one theatre is of limited utility elsewhere.

Second, and related to this, is the lack of comparative understanding afforded by close scrutiny of particular communities, in search of what Clifford Geertz called a ‘thick

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[10] The approach in Norman Dixon’s book, a reading list favourite, typifies this dispositional, personality based approach to understanding military behaviour. Dixon, N. F. (1976). On the psychology of military incompetence. London, Cape.

understanding' of individual cultures.[11] Anthropology can provide some general insights about how individuals and groups respond to outsiders, but a more rigorous understanding is on offer from psychology, notably social psychology, which has much to say about group dynamics - including the attainment of influence within a group. Social psychologists employ a range of experimental and field research techniques, both quantitative and qualitative, to test in rigorous fashion hypotheses about group behaviours.

In a recent British Army Review article, I laid out some basic psychological principles that are of use in understanding communication in counterinsurgency.[12] I made the point that truth was oftentimes more a matter of social validity than objective ontology. I argued that emotions are an integral part of decision-making, and that facts were not the only emotionally arousing component in any communication, and I suggested that the literature on attitude formation and change within groups, notably that on offer in Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory, could provide some useful insights on effective communication.[13] Building on this, I began an elective MA special subject on the psychology of persuasion in war as part of the Advanced Command and Staff course, and I introduced civilian social psychologists to the course to brief on some key findings from the lab and field, and explore the relationships between this work - much of which has been explicitly designed to investigate inter-group conflict - and war. These small efforts reflect my belief that psychology, rather more than subjects like marketing and advertising which themselves rest on psychological principles, can offer some telling insights into influence, and the construction of strategy envisaged as communication. While a great deal of attention in both evolutionary and social psychology has been spent trying to understand organised group violence, comparatively little psychology has fed into the strategic studies literature aimed at understanding how group violence is used instrumentally.

Cognitive consistency theory

In the remainder of this short paper, I want to focus on one concept from psychology that can readily be applied by those seeking to be more effective strategic communicators - Leon Festinger's classic theory of cognitive dissonance. Understanding and communication are essentially passive terms, as far as the audience goes. Strategy, however, conveys the idea of more activity - one acts on the target group in order to change it in some way. This idea of behavioural change is one that can be applied to SC. Rather than simply messaging a group, and hoping for the best, one can construct messages and choices intended to shape behaviours, and thereby modify underlying attitudes.

At first glance, this runs counter to our commonsense, or folk psychological, understanding of human behaviour, in which our attitudes shape our behaviour. They can do so, of course, but the relationship between behaviour and attitudes is not necessarily so straightforward. In the late 1950s, Leon Festinger and colleagues advanced the theory of

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[11] Geertz, C. (2000). Available light : anthropological reflections on philosophical topics. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

[12] Payne, K. (2011). "Some principles for influence in counterinsurgency." British Army Review **150**.

[13] For an excellent overview of SIT and SCT, see Haslam, S. A., S. Reicher, et al. (2011). The new psychology of leadership : identity, influence, and power. Hove, Psychology Press.

cognitive dissonance.[14] They suggested that humans are uncomfortable holding simultaneously two or more ideas or attitudes that are in obvious tension, and that they will work to reduce the tension, or dissonance between such ideas. The theory is essentially emotional - dissonance undermines our self-conception as consistent thinkers. The psychologists were not proscriptive about the way in which the tension could be resolved, but some obvious candidates suggested themselves: for example, incoming information that is discrepant with existing and entrenched beliefs can be downplayed, ignored, or simply reinterpreted in order to cohere with them. A great deal of experimental work backs up this tendency.[15] Another, alternative scenario has also received experimental and practical attention. Here the theory is that rather than our attitudes driving our behaviour, so that we change our behaviour to be consistent with our attitude, it may be that the reverse is true: if we are behaving in a particular way that is in tension with established beliefs - it may well be the beliefs that change first. This might be particularly true if the beliefs are received reduced social validity from our referent groups. That is, if we find ourselves in a situation where the usual group attitudes we imbibe are absent, or diminished, and if we are behaving in a manner inconsistent with those attitudes, then our underlying attitudes might be more amenable to shift.

Social psychologists, particularly those versed in Self Categorisation Theory talk of 'referent groups', and broadly suggest that there are multiple identities which can appeal to us in different contexts.[16] We may or may not actually be a member of such groups, but they influence our attitudes and behaviours. Each of these groups comes with its own set of attitudes and norms. So to change behaviours, one might, for example, need to engage a different referent group for the target audience. That way, the influence of well established norms is weakened, and new behaviours might be more readily promoted.

In a wartime context, the theory was given a practical demonstration at the same time that Festinger was developing it, in the 'brainwashing' of US prisoners of war captured during the Korean conflict, and interrogated by Chinese Communists. Some of these men evinced a significant and apparently genuine shift in attitude towards the United States. On their return to the US, the men were debriefed by military psychologists, two of whom subsequently published the findings of their inquiries.[17] The gist backed up Festinger's concepts - the established groups to which the men belonged had been systematically degraded by the Communists - undercutting the support for their existing views. Then, the men had been compelled to engage in self-criticism and informing sessions - publicly attacking their own beliefs, and informing on colleagues. Both these behaviours served to identify them publicly with the Communist regime, and - as per cognitive dissonance theory - the tension in their beliefs was apparently eased by shifting their underlying attitudes. If I am doing it, it must be right - is the general thesis.

In the same period, but in a different theatre, another American academic, Lucien Pye, was interviewing surrendered Communists involved in the insurgency struggle against

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[14] Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Evanston, Ill.,, Row.

[15] For a good introductory overview, see Hogg, M. A. and G. M. Vaughan (2011). Social psychology. Harlow, Prentice Hall.

[16] Turner, J. C. (1987). Rediscovering the social group : a self-categorization theory. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

[17] Schein, E. H. (1956). "Some Observations on Chinese Methods of Handling Prisoners of War." The Public Opinion Quarterly **20**(1): 321-327.; Segal, H. A. (1954). "Initial psychiatric findings of recently repatriated prinsoners of war " Am J Psychiatry **111**(5): 358-363.

Colonial authority in Malaya.[18] Again, Pye found that the same commitment-consistency principles were at work in explaining the behaviour of the onetime Communists. These young men were attracted to the Party not because of their pre-existing anti-government beliefs, but in large measure because their friends were joining, and it was seen as a means to get ahead more quickly than was possible in the hierarchical and patrimonial traditional societal structures among ethnic Chinese in rural Malaya. Only once the men were in the Party organisation, and subject to the same indoctrination processes as the American POWs did the men start to shift their attitudes in line with their behaviour - with some eventually becoming radical militants prepared to engage in terrorist attacks against the state.

Cognitive dissonance and communications

How does this behaviour-attitude dynamic relate to communications in general, and SC in particular? Perhaps the most profound contribution of this psychological literature is to undermine the simplistic model of consistent truthful communication as the best way of winning over target audiences. To begin with, it acknowledges and demonstrates that much truth is socially validated - we imbibe and accept the norms and attitudes of our referent group, and can discount discrepant information that jars with that. Providing evidence of Al Qa'eda's involvement in the attacks on 9/11 may not, for example, be sufficient to persuade those who see a conspiracy, or the mendacious hand of Zionism in bringing about attacks on the Muslim *Ummah*. This suggests that messages are perceived in particular ways by particular groups - thus it may not be that the much feared 'cross-over' effect is a straightforward proposition. Some groups may give less attention to a message than others, and even if they do perceive it, may ascribe a different meaning to it. Consistency between groups, in other words, may not be the lynchpin of credibility that DCDC suggest.

An example of the tensions involved comes from the Petraeus 'millstone' strategy in Afghanistan.[19] Understandably outraged by Taliban brutality inflicted on locals, Petraeus urged his subordinates to 'Hang their barbaric actions like millstones around their necks'. The picture of a beautiful young woman mutilated by the Taliban on the cover of TIME magazine suggested that the strategy might have something going for it - it highlighted the extreme intolerance and illiberality of hardline Talibs, and thereby worked to bolster support for a coalition operation by liberal western states whose populations have evinced a profound apathy at best towards the expensive and long-running NATO stabilisation effort. But some communication and psychological warfare specialists were wary about applying the millstone strategy universally, including to communications messages within Afghanistan - especially the Pashtun south. Here, some locals find in the Taliban a form of, admittedly rough, but comparatively transparent, efficient and cheap justice - compared, of course, to that on offer from the NATO backed Kabul government, renowned for its corruption and inefficiency. More broadly, for some potential and actual Taliban sympathisers, since many of the values proferred by the Taliban are already close to their own, a critical message from outside is likely to find an unsympathetic, even sceptical ear. Finally, the ostensible goal of terrorism is to use the horror and fear attendant on an atrocity to maximise publicity, whether to prompt a backlash by the authorities, or to cow

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[18] Pye, L. W. (1956). Guerrilla communism in Malaya, its social and political meaning. Princeton,, Princeton University Press.

[19] Petraeus, D. (1 August 2010). COMISAF's Counterinsurgency Guidance. A. ISAF, NATO., at http://www.isaf.nato.int/from-the-commander/from-the-commander/comisaf-s-counterinsurgency-guidance.html

potential government sympathisers into inaction. In which case, enhancing the existing propaganda of terror attacks risks serving the goals of the perpetrators. In any event, the reception afforded the millstone strategy by some tasked with communicating strategy within Afghanistan suggested that the idea of consistent thematic messaging might be flawed.

Related to this is the idea of truthfulness. A sensible propagandist is unlikely to undermine his credibility by including too many 'facts' that are demonstrably false and can be readily verified as such by an audience. But since many 'facts' are less objective, and since part of the editorial process is in any case deciding which facts to include and which to leave out, the simplistic emphasis on truth and credibility is, like consistency, also exposed by the concept of social identity theory and related ideas in social psychology. And that's before the concept of affective associations with particular idiom or symbols comes to bear. The emotions associated with language can exert a considerable influence, and is as one would imagine to some extent contingent on the norms associated with membership in a particular group. Facts that cut against those meanings, and facts that do not favour the ingroup over the outgroup are less likely to be attributed with great credibility.

So much for truth and consistency establishing credibility in the anticipated fashion. The second area in which cognitive consistency theory provides insight is in that relationship between behaviour and attitude change. Here it suggests that Strategic Communicators might more effectively gear their 'strategy *as* communication' in order to shift underlying attitudes of target audiences by changing their behaviour first, rather than the other way about.

In their popular book, *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein describe how the framing of choices can act to shape people's behaviours.[20] For example, by exploiting a natural tendency towards inertia, so that rather than opting into an increased pension contribution scheme, people have to opt out - thereby radical increasing the uptake of enhanced pension contributions. Their attitudes have not necessarily been changed directly, but their behaviour has - radically. And if behaviour shifts attitudes, then one might expect an underlying shift in attitude too. This emerging understanding of behavioural tendencies and our capacity to exploit them to beneficial ends is a core theme in the burgeoning discipline of behavioural economics.

Thus, even if we conceive of communication as simply verbalised or image based messaging, by changing the way in which messages are framed, we can work to change intermediate behaviours that then go on to act on underlying beliefs and attitudes.

Moreover, if we conceptualise SC, as the military increasingly does, as being about active as well as verbal 'communication' with an audience, then we can readily imagine non-violent or coercive activities designed to shape behaviours. An example of the latter comes from a student of mine, previously deployed as a company commander in Afghanistan. This Army major was involved in buying goats from local farmers to use as food for his company of hungry Gurkhas. Over the period of their deployment, there was a chance to establish a relationship with the locals, and use that interaction to communicate in an effort to shift underlying attitudes favourably. As the major related later, in recounting the tale as part of his MA essay on my psychology in war course, this was a chance to exploit

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[20] Thaler, R. H. and C. R. Sunstein (2009). Nudge : improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness. London, Penguin Books.

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance - though the soldiers, being ignorant of Festinger and cognitive dissonance, did not seize on it as such.

The trick is to calibrate the price, so that the farmer is exposed to maximum cognitive dissonance. Too high a price, and the farmer can take satisfaction in his shrewd exploitative dealings with an ignorant and disliked outsider. Too low, and the farmer, if he sells, will feel exploited and unable to resist a powerful and hostile actor. In both cases, he can readily reconcile his behaviour with his anti-British attitude. But if the price is close to market value, or only a small premium above it, then the farmer has a dilemma - he is selling goats to a foreign force, a representative of the Kabul government. How can he preserve his self-esteem, in such a circumstance? Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that he can do that by shifting his underlying attitude to make it more favourable to the British contingent.

This is a micro example of a concept that could be adopted on any scale. The framing of choices and shaping of behaviour to shift attitudes can be imaginatively applied to individual farmers, or larger communities. Farmers engaged in micro-loan agreements with the state have struck a bargain in a more profound way than farmers who receive aid handouts, for example. They are committed to a mutually risky relationship with the government, giving them a cognitive dissonance problem whose magnitude varies according to the balance of risk and return built into the programme.

In the 1950s, French counterinsurgency theorists alighted on a tradition they called *guerre psychologique*. Perhaps not coincidentally, since some had first hand experience of Communist indoctrination techniques, the French officers had a keen appreciation of war as a social psychological phenomenon, and - moreover, one in which shaping behaviours could do much to shape underlying attitudes. Thus while we find in some French counterinsurgency writing, such as the famous work by David Galula, a familiar and simple emphasis on truth and the need to be honest in propaganda efforts, we also find a more sophisticated understanding of persuasion.[21] Much of this literature has not been translated, which is one reason it is less well known in the Anglo-Saxon counterinsurgency community than the two more commonly cited Frenchmen, David Galula and Roger Trinquier, and hence less drawn upon. Perhaps another reason for its perceived limited utility is the radically different moral universe inhabited by the French authors. Their understanding of the role of organisation and public declarations in shaping public attitudes is very close to the Communist - that is to say their conception is totalitarian.[22] But the French authors, while not quite independently developing a concept of cognitive dissonance, nonetheless point to an understanding of war as a psychological phenomenon in which identity is important, and where the counterinsurgent is engaged in a struggle to shape the identities in the way he wants.

If this is totalitarian, so too, in a sense, is the conception of SC offered here - if we are all products of our social milieu, then the job of the propagandist, or constructor of narratives,

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[21] See for the simplistic view, Galula, D. and J. A. Nagl (2006). Counterinsurgency warfare : theory and practice. Westport, CT ; London, Praeger Security International., especially p. 9

[22] A good overview is de Durand, E, 'France' in Rid, T. and T. A. Keaney (2010). Understanding counterinsurgency : doctrine, operations and challenges. London, Routledge., pp. 11-27 Typical of the genre, and excellent on the role of self-criticism in Communist indoctrination is Hogard, J. (1956). "Guerre Revolutionnarie ou Revolution dans l'art de la guerre." 1497-1518. For a detailed discussion see Kenneth Payne, 'Hearts and Minds? Psychology in classic counterinsurgency writing', Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association Annual Conference, Montreal, 16 March, 2011

is less to provide a compelling story, and rather more to change our social milieu so that the story he wants to tell is compelling. You do not simply argue that the government is good - rather you involve the people in joint, mutually dependent behaviours with the government in order to shift their underlying attitudes and make them more receptive to your message.

Conclusion: SC as behavioural strategy

Is this exploitation of the behavior-attitude dynamic in any sense about communication? Not in the narrow sense of that envisaged by some media professionals who see communication *of* strategy as the essence of SC. But in the holistic sense that DCDC is driving towards, in which SC is communication *as* strategy, it certainly is. By engaging new referent groups or promoting existing but secondary ones, outsider actors can hope to promote norms, attitudes and behaviours that are radically different from prevailing ones. And by shaping behaviours, as cognitive dissonance theory suggests, outside actors can promote new referent groups, and the attendant attitudes. Societal structures and cultures can change quite quickly; for example, the levels of violence characteristic of insurgencies can both rise and fall dramatically in a short period. The role of the strategic communicator is to understand and promote interactions with target audiences that will shift behaviours, and through that attitudes, to strategic advantage. That is a long way from spokesmen appearing on *Al Jazeera*, but rather closer to the idea of using all Defence means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people.

Exploiting cognitive dissonance is one way in which attitude change can be achieved. There are plenty of others. But many remain under-explored and underexploited, at least by mainstream military practitioners. If Strategic Communication is to be anything more than a poorly conceptualised buzzword or slogan, then those interested in the problem of persuasion in wartime must deepen and broaden their understanding of the means through which influence is attained. Social psychology, indeed psychology more broadly, has plenty of robust findings that can be utilised by practitioners. The dilemma for the military is whether and how to engage with this literature - is it the stuff of specialists, or generalist officers? The thrust from DCDC suggests the latter. In which case, DCDC must lead the move away from naive understandings of truth and credibility - acknowledging that there is a world of difference between lying and constructing a persuasive narrative is a promising start.

ENDS

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