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IR Field Seminar

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Emotions, Pattern Recognition and Decision-Making (S.P. Rosen)

Introduction:

Rosen states that rational choice theory (the process of using “obvious” information to perform some kind of calculation of the benefits of alternative strategies) rests on the foundation that states behave “as if” they were making rational calculations i.e. it is difficult to decide rationality or irrationality because if outcomes conform to predictions made on the basis of rationality, then states are deemed to have behaved “rationally”. However, people often make decisions that are not the result of the comparison of alternative expected outcomes.

Rosen discusses decisions that are made on the basis of emotion-based pattern recognition (EPBR)—a process of which the decision maker may or may not be aware. When a complex problem is presented, conscious cognition plays a secondary role after a basic course of action has been determined by EPBR. He emphasizes that his theory is descriptive not normative i.e. it describes the way people do behave not the way they should behave if they want to achieve optimum results. “Policy failure does not prove the operation of EBPR but neither do good results prove the operation of rational search mechanisms” (p. 5).

Argument:

The brain holds far more information than we can or do hold in our conscious mind at any moment. The brain has ways of using that massive amount of information even if we cannot be consciously aware of much of it at any one time. **Pattern recognition** occurs when the brain dis-aggregates discrete items of information into blocks. Past **emotional arousal** reduces the processing time of these patterns and activates pattern recognition in ways that are associated with decisions. The memories with high emotional content may be preferentially if inaccurately recalled and they stimulate the production of an **autonomic nervous system** (ANS). The activation of ANS can have two effects—1. it changes the internal state of our bodies and enhances our ability to remember events associated with the experience and 2. the enhanced memory can take two forms: conscious and unconscious awareness. Moreover, emotional arousal occurs indepen-

dently of conscious cognition. This can lead to the adoption or rejection of a proposed course of action because of the interaction of present cues with past emotional experiences.

Results suggest that in normal individuals, non conscious biases guide behavior before conscious knowledge does. Without the help of such biases, overt knowledge may be insufficient to ensure advantageous behavior. The biases or emotional responses do not dictate a precise course of action but predispose those experiencing them towards risk aversion. Therefore, the analysis lead to 4 testable propositions:

- if decisions are made on EPBR, the decision will be made quickly and early in the process in spite of the complexity of the situation and the availability of contradictory data.
- the decisions will directly conform to past emotional experience i.e. a negative experience will lead the actor to select away from the policy that was associated with that negative emotion.
- the decisions will resist contradictory data.
- these decisions can be differentiated from those in which decision are delayed in order to permit the accumulation of data and analysis and which no strong relation to past emotional experience.

Case Studies:

There are 4 case studies. The conclusions are as follows:

1. FDR decided to oppose Hitler diplomatically because of the non-verbal content of Hitler's and Chamberlain's radio speeches which activated an emotional response.
2. Truman decided to trust the USSR and Stalin because the latter was reminded him of his political patron—a man whom he trusted and liked.
3. Kennedy decided to put military pressure on the USSR to withdraw missiles during the Cuban missile crisis because he disliked and mistrusted Khrushchev.
4. Lyndon B. Johnson was committed to not backing down from the Vietnam crisis because he felt “national honor was at stake and we've to conduct ourselves like men”.

Emotional response if not a guarantee that a policy will be chosen that optimizes the returns to the actor.