

## **Dissonance and Decision-Making Mistakes in the Age of Risk**

## **Abstract**

Scholars of public and foreign policy have emphasized the role of decision processes in the creation of policy failures and fiascos and have demonstrated the importance that psychological factors play in policy mistakes. Using Ulrich Beck's notion of *world risk society* and drawing on advances in our understanding of a key psychological factor central to decision-making pathologies – cognitive dissonance – this article explores the ways in which features of the risk era could alter important decision dynamics and increase decision-making mistakes. In combination with the catastrophic potential of *world risk society*, this would suggest an increase in the frequency of policymaking fiascos. Bridging the gap between the “macro” conditions of globalisation and the “micro” processes of decision-making also challenges our conception of both the nature and sources of policymaking mistakes and suggests that our scholarly understanding of “decision-making mistakes” may need rethinking.

**Key Words: Risk, Dissonance, Decision-Making, Mistakes, Fiascos**

## Introduction

A general consensus has emerged that many policy failures and fiascoes can be linked to problems within decision-making processes. While various organisational and institutional sources have been identified as contributing to policymaking errors, psychological factors (e.g. heuristics and biases; the framing of prospects; small group dynamics) play a key role. While such “micro-processes” can influence decisions, they always occur within a larger context that shapes their impact on policy outcomes. Sensitive to this, researchers have argued for an interplay between individual psychological factors and the broader organisational context within which they occur. Janis’s *Groupthink* is an early example of work that incorporated both ‘structural faults’ (e.g. insulation of the group) and a ‘provocative context’ (e.g. external threats and situational complexity) as antecedents to psychological pitfalls and poor decision-making processes (Janis, 1982).

The broadest sociological context and contours of the international system, however, have rarely been examined with regard to their impact on the psychological dynamics of decision-making. Local conditions have had pride of place. In practice they are linked, but analytically they are all too often examined separately. Yet arguments abound regarding the prevalence of dramatic changes at the broadest levels of international society, ranging from ‘globalisation’, to the rise of civilizational fissures defining the future of conflict (cf. Huntington, 1996), to the development of global civil society (cf. Kumar, 2008), but little work has systematically linked such ‘macro’ international conditions to ‘micro’ decision-making processes. This omission is important, as a sociological perspective can enhance any enquiry.

This article offers one approach to connecting broad international changes in the “age of globalization” to decision-making dynamics among policymakers. For this purpose I draw

upon prominent sociologist Ulrich Beck's *world risk society* (*WRS*) thesis (Beck 1992, 1999; Beck & Cronin 2009), arguing that his view of the changing global context should also create specific cognitive dynamics that promote decision-making mistakes and contribute to policy fiascos. A key aspect of this argument is that risk decisions – decisions involving significant uncertainty and the need to prevent self-generated, unpredictable, uncontrollable outcomes with global catastrophic potential – specifically activate a range of sources of cognitive dissonance, the reduction of which is at the heart of a wide variety of decision-making mistakes. I begin by offering a brief overview of Beck's *WRS* thesis followed by a brief introduction to the theory of cognitive dissonance. I then connect key features of *WRS* to dynamics of cognitive dissonance and associated decision-making mistakes that are increasingly likely to occur in the age of risk, referring in particular to the post-September 11 “war on terror” policy responses and the 2003 Iraq war to illustrate the argument. I end the paper with some observations about the future study of policymaking mistakes and fiascoes.

### **Risk and *World Risk Society*: Overview**

Scholarship on risk has burgeoned over the last few decades, despite the concept of risk not having a commonly agreed definition (Garland 2003). While a variety of major sociological approaches to risk exist (Zinn 2006), I will focus on the *WRS* thesis of Ulrich Beck (Beck, 1999). Beck's work has generated an avalanche of scholarship following from his *Risk Society* (1992), but it has also drawn heavy criticism (Scott 2000; Mythen 2004; Elliott 2002). Beck's *WRS* thesis, however, offers some important features that lend it to the type of theorizing relevant here, such as its explicit focus on decisions as a source of the reputed transformations at work in the current era and its explicit if provocative and much

critiqued inclusion of terrorism, which I use for my illustrations. I recognize, however, that *WRS* is a much-contested assertion, to which I will briefly return in my conclusions.

According to Beck, modern industrial society has been successful in addressing individuals' needs by greatly reducing scarcity and providing the necessary governance and resources to foster technological progress and provide material improvements. But society now faces a transformation where these widespread successes are altering key social institutions and practices (e.g. class, sex roles, the nuclear family) and even beginning to undermine themselves. "The term *risk society*...epitomizes an era of modern society that no longer merely casts off traditional ways of life but rather wrestles with the side effects of successful modernization..." (Beck & Cronin, 2009: 8). Beck sees the success of modernity as having created a transformation to a second modernity, a period he calls 'reflexive modernity' that has itself resulted in the uncontrollable risks we now face. The irony is that the remarkable human progress encapsulated within the scientific and technological breakthroughs of the modern era (which Beck essentially celebrates) has also resulted in widespread risks such as financial meltdown, the effects of climate change, and international terrorism.

A key distinction Beck makes is between 'hazards' and 'risks'. Hazards represent catastrophes that happen to humanity which have essentially been ever-present – such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. Risks represent, on the other hand, potential catastrophes that humanity has itself created,. These, in turn, are rooted in decision-making that has included a sense of acceptability of some risk in exchange for benefits. '[R]isks presume industrial, that is, techno-economic decisions and considerations of utility....They differ from pre-industrial natural disasters by their origin in decision-making....' (Beck 1992: 98). These conditions also give rise to great uncertainty, as society shifts toward the "reflexive rationality" of preventing crises arising from the essentially uncontrollable techno-

scientific realities rather than the “linear rationality” of pursuing positive goals. Reflexive modernisation thus represents a condition wherein there is awareness of, and effort to reduce, the self-generated risks of modern industrial society through processes of regulation and employing the precautionary principle.

In sum, the *WRS* thesis describes a context wherein the types of problems that policymakers are grappling with are replete with uncertainty, self-generated, catastrophic in potential, causally elusive, difficult to predict, and largely uncontrollable. These risks are not localised but can become global in scope, their probabilities incalculable and their consequences uninsurable (Beck, 2008). States face the difficulty of not knowing the nature, source, and magnitude of the next international crisis to which they must attend, alongside heightened accountability by publics that demand to feel secure from the anxiety of unknown risks without possibility of compensation. Moreover, the source of such crises will increasingly be non-state and even ‘non-actor’ in nature (e.g. nuclear meltdown, global financial collapse, disease outbreak, global terrorist networks), generated by the very actors tasked with dealing with the consequences. I will argue that these very conditions affect policymakers by heightening cognitive dissonance, which negatively impacts the quality of their decision-making.

### **Cognitive Dissonance Theory: Overview**

Despite the frequent casual use of the term, “dissonance” is a sophisticated and detailed psychological theory that is one of the most influence within the field of social psychology (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Randles et al, 2015) and continues to generate much research. Festinger (1957) proposed that cognitions, when brought together, could either be consonant or dissonant with one another. Dissonant pieces of knowledge give rise to an unpleasant, aversive feeling within the individual, motivating dissonance reduction (and dissonance avoidance in the first instance). “Dissonance” is the aversive feeling within

individuals that arises due to inconsistencies (Gawronski, 2012), and such inconsistencies can originate from various cognitions, including cognitions about the world, the self, and behaviours, and dissonance can vary in intensity with a correspondingly intense motivation to reduce it.

Dissonance can be reduced in various ways, such as by the rational but comparatively rare behavioural changes ('I smoke. I know smoking causes cancer. I'll quit smoking'), to more moderate cognitive distortions ('I smoke, but not as much as somebody who might get cancer'), to full blown denial ('They say smoking causes cancer, but it really doesn't'). Reducing dissonance can be very functional and adaptive for an individual, motivating us to reduce our cognitive workload, protect our sense of self worth, or even resolve internal conflicts so that behaviour can occur (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, & Levy 2015). Dissonance reduction, however, most often results in some level of distortion, self-deception, and infidelity between our beliefs about the world and the world itself. In the majority of cases the reduction of dissonance is achieved by altering information used to form beliefs, preferences, and make decisions which can result in reasoning errors and mistakes in individuals' perceptions and judgments.

While Festinger's original conception of dissonance has been robust, there have been several advances in our understanding of the sources of dissonance that have relevance to decision making in the age of risk. Nearly sixty years of research have found that dissonance is associated with commitment to difficult choices, can be enhanced by uncertainty, implicates the 'self', is intensified by ethical failure, and involves the desire to reduce the impact of aversive consequences. These features make dissonance theory remarkably apt for applying to policy decision-making in the risk era.

## **World Risk Society, Dissonance, and Decision-Making**

*World Risk Society* entails several factors that should activate cognitive dissonance in decision-makers, increasing the likelihood of several types of decision-making errors. Combined with the catastrophic potential of *WRS*, this could result in a recipe for policy fiascoes. Table 1 presents a summary of the key ‘*World Risk Society* Factors’ proposed to be relevant to policy decision making (column 1). Associated with each of these is the proposed ‘Source of Dissonance’ that should become activated, according to cognitive dissonance theory (column 2), and the ‘Dissonance Reduction by Policymakers’ likely utilised by decision-makers to alleviate the uncomfortable feeling of dissonance (column 3) will be discussed. Finally, the ‘Negative Impacts on Decision-Making Process’ likely to follow from dissonance and its reduction are offered (column 4). Each of these connections will be clarified in the following sections.

I will primarily draw examples from the “war on terror” and the US-led invasion of Iraq. These are not meant to test my argument, but rather as plausible illustrations for purposes of clarity. The “war on terror” is well suited for this purpose. Beck explicitly focuses on “terrorism” (Beck 2002, 2003), and a large body of scholarship has emerged exploring risk society and aspects of terrorism and counter-terrorism (cf. Aradau & van Munster 2007; Heng 2002, 2006; Krahmman 2011). The policy responses to 9-11 are arguably a good example of risk society dynamics. “Just as war against terror is a global war, risk society is amongst other things a paradigm of globalization, and as such is particularly suited to the interpretation of the response to September 11 2001, and its effects.” (Spence, 2005: 284). Moreover, the decision to incorporate Iraq into the “war on terror” has itself been scrutinized for the presence of decision-making mistakes (Badie 2010; Mintz & Wayne 2014) and is widely seen as a policy failure (cf. Western 2013). It thus serves as a convenient



illustration of the ways in which cognitive dissonance might operate within the realm of policymaking and contribute to policymaking mistakes and fiascos.

Table 1: World Risk Society, Dissonance, and Decision-making

<i>World Risk Society Factors</i>	Source of Dissonance	Dissonance Reduction by Policymakers	Negative Impacts on Decision-Making Process
Prevention of Unpredictable & Uncontrollable Risks	Uncertainty & Violated Expectations	Deny Failures Increase Confidence in Policies	Poor Information Search and Biased Processing Poor Group Dynamics (overestimate group; pressure towards uniformity; etc.)
Self-Generated Risks	Committed Self Implicated	Enhance Self-Image	Poor Survey of Objectives
Global Catastrophic Potential	Aversive Consequences & Moral Dissonance	Avoid & Distort Dissonant Information Deny Responsibility Deny Harm	Confirmation Bias/Overconfidence Reduce Reliance on Outside Experts

*World Risk Society Factors and Sources of Dissonance*

Prevention of Unpredictable & Uncontrollable Risks/Uncertainty & Violated Expectations:

The first major dimension of *WRS* likely to give rise to dissonance is uncertainty. Beck argues that the “regime of non-knowing” is created when policymakers cannot discern the agents of threat, their potential, or their intentions (Beck & Cronin, 2009). “World risk society is confronted with the awkward problem of having to make decisions about life and death and war and peace on the basis of a more or less frank lack of knowledge” (Beck 2008: 6). Risks are not only difficult to predict or control (Beck, 1999; Beck & Cronin, 2009), but they are also uninsurable and beyond compensation. Governments thus turn to the precautionary principle and seek to prevent risks from materialising in the first instance (Beck, 2009). This puts policymaking in a more “reflexive” state of risk management under

uncertainty, which involves committed efforts to prevent the worst from happening, and defining “success” as “non-failure”.

There is little definitive information that confirms the effectiveness of chosen policies when trying to “prevent a bad outcome” instead of trying to “create a good outcome”, so policymakers live in a sort of continuous informational limbo which in turn drives the need to convince themselves that actions or policies have indeed resulted in the expected prevention. This should create information-based dissonance, as no real consonant information can demonstrate policy success. Decision-makers must increasingly plan for the unexpected, the unknown. Risk management’s preventive orientation only specifies that dangers exist and may materialise, but the time and place of those dangers is unclear. For policymakers, there is significant inconsistency between their claims of having successfully caused non-events and the attributions of policy failure when an event occurs despite their efforts to prevent it. The nearly impossible prevention of negative outcomes should more frequently and reliably generate violated expectations.

Conditions of uncertainty and violated expectations are particularly prone to producing dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory has been directly linked to uncertainty (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs 2006), in that they both “...describe inconsistent cognitions or unexpected events as leading to an aversive arousal state, which leads to predictable behavioural change in the service of reducing the arousal” (Randles et al, 2015). Violated expectations themselves were seen by Festinger (1957) as central to dissonance. He recounts a fringe cult that incorrectly predicted the end of the world and struggled to reconcile their intense commitment to the cause with the reality of their continued existence. The group’s leader reduced dissonance in the unexpected morning by reporting to the others that their steadfast commitment was what prevented the destruction of the Earth (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter 1956). In this way, the group claimed success for a “non-event” and thereby reduce

dissonance. More recently, Proulx and colleagues (Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones 2012) have proposed an "...integrative perspective [that] construes 'inconsistencies' as any detected expectancy violation..." (285), thus placing expectations as the central dynamic producing aversive arousal and efforts to reduce it.

### *Dissonance Reduction by Policymakers*

Dissonance by its very nature motivates the reduction of intra-psychoic uncertainty. We should expect to see an increased tendency for decision makers to deny that events represent a failure of policy, focusing instead on positive outcomes and indicators of success. Beck sees the political motivations of elites as they grapple with the challenge of providing security in the context of *WRS*, suggesting that they can essentially "feign control" and claim that they have successfully managed risks. "Given their task of averting dangers, politicians, in particular, may easily find themselves compelled to proclaim that the observance of security standards is assured even though such guarantees are impossible. They do so nonetheless because the *political* costs of omission are much higher than those of an overreaction" (Beck & Cronin, 2009: 53-54). While realised crises may present such opportunities to frame policy (Boin et al., 2009), they are also an opportunity to reduce dissonance by re-framing them as positive outcomes. Even many years after the fact, former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice hints, for example, that the Arab uprisings would have been impossible without the administration having removed Hussein from power in Iraq (USA Today 2011).

In order to reduce dissonance associated with the lack of information supporting preventive policies, policymakers will likely seek information in a biased fashion to support their expectations (Scherer, Windschitl, & Smith 2013; Johnson & Tierney 2011). This may have been evident in former Vice-President Dick Cheney's assertion, just prior to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, that the U.S would be greeted as liberators because Iraqis *currently*

*opposed* to Hussein indicated that it would happen. Pointing to discussions with Kanan Makiya, whom he notes is part of the resistance to the Hussein regime, Cheney indicates that “[t]he read we get on the people of Iraq is there is no question but what they want to get rid of Saddam Hussein and they will welcome as liberators the United States when we come to do that” (Cheney, Meet the Press interview, 2003).

We can also see overconfidence in advance of a policy as an effort to mobilise support. Maor (2012) explicitly examines policy ‘overreaction’ from a psychological point of view, and argues that “...policy-makers may look for proactive framings of crisis management, especially the use of non-language in the form of highly visual and dramatic information that is easily remembered...” (243). Secretary of State Colin Powell’s crucial speech at the United Nations in advance of the Iraq war is illustrative, involving his holding up a mock vial of anthrax and displaying charts of mobile production facilities (Vogel 2008). When policies fail to prevent an unexpected outcome, dissonance may prompt the seeking of enhanced feelings of self-worth and self-affirmations. Indeed, we may even see more overconfidence (Blanton, et al. 2001) and an enhanced belief in the ability to predict and control events as a dissonance reduction compensation for policy failures. As is often the case with dissonance reduction, disconfirming information results in bolstering beliefs instead of challenging them. Early on, the Bush administration was keen to argue that the invasion was successful, reducing the threat of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists (CNN, 2003). When counter-attacks began to occur in Iraq and elsewhere, the focus shifted to changing the measures of success, a task that befuddled key policymakers like Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (USAToday, 2003).

Self-Generated Risks/Committed Self Implicated: The second major dimension of *WRS* with implications for cognitive dissonance involves the origin of risks. In Beck’s view, risks are

generated by deliberate techno-scientific decisions, and this directly implicates those responsible when such decisions result in unintended crises. He notes that "...with the origin of industrial risks in decision-making the problem of social accountability and responsibility irrevocably arises....As we sociologists say, the social roots of risks block the 'externalizability' of the problem of accountability." (Beck 1992: 98). In some instances specific decision makers are directly implicated in choices that have been made, and at other times governments carry forward policies of their predecessors – such as maintaining reliance on nuclear energy or supporting a set of financial regulatory practices. The first instance represents a direct commitment to an action or decision, while the second instance can be viewed from the 'induced compliance' dissonance paradigm wherein individuals willingly but reluctantly engage in counter-attitudinal behavior. In either case policymakers become connected to the policy in question.

Under such circumstances, the 'self' is implicated as being responsible for outcomes by having committed – even if reluctantly – to a course of action. Scholars have demonstrated this to be central for the arousal of dissonance (Cooper 2007). Although Beck has been critiqued for his stark distinction between "natural hazards" and "manufactured risks" (Furedi 2002; Mythen 2004), from a dissonance perspective it is the degree to which events follow from prior decision that matters most. Indeed, self-consistency theory (Aronson, 1999), as an approach to cognitive dissonance, says the self must be involved to arouse dissonance. Steele's "self-affirmation" theory (1988) goes further in saying that we want to see ourselves as good, competent people, and the "drive" associated with inconsistencies is better understood as the pursuit of self-esteem and self-worth. If our actions are responsible for a negative outcome, then dissonance is likely to arise – even if the reduction of that dissonance involves denying our involvement.

Global Catastrophic Potential/Aversive Consequences & Moral Dissonance: The third major dimension of *WRS* that arguably evokes cognitive dissonance involves its catastrophic potential. Governments are tasked with preventing risks from materialising that are potentially catastrophic in nature, indiscriminate in consequence, and global in scope.<sup>7</sup> These include regional or global catastrophes such as Chernobyl, Fukushima or the global financial collapse, alongside the more calculated but equally ‘non-state’ threats of global terrorism. Beck views these as so significant that they move beyond the realm of compensation, such that they are uninsurable and, indeed, incalculable (Beck 2008). Even when such crises do not materialize, they are anticipated and constructed as potential threats to be prevented. The desire to avoid catastrophic consequences is a key feature of *WRS*.

Cognitive dissonance is centrally concerned with the avoidance of negative consequences, and several approaches to dissonance emphasize that it is not merely about cognitive inconsistencies, but rather the desire to make unwanted consequence less aversive (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Scher & Cooper, 1989; Johnson, Kelly, and LeBlanc 1995). The significant negative consequences also mean that moral implications of policy fiascoes are profound, and combined with the self-generated nature of these risks, the moral culpability of policymakers is evident. As Adams notes, ‘[r]isk-management decisions are moral decisions made in the face of uncertainty’ (Adams 2003:87). The uninsurable nature of these risks further highlights the moral implications, as governments can no longer exchange failed security from risks for compensation. In such circumstances individuals are more likely to experience ‘ethical dissonance’, connecting their own shortcomings and decision-making errors with the outcome.

Steel’s self affirmation theory rests not only on self-esteem but also on the idea that “seeing oneself as good and moral is the objective” (Cooper, 2007: 98). Barkan and colleagues (2012) explicitly identify “ethical dissonance” as a special type of dissonance,

defined as an inconsistency between one's drive to preserve a moral self-image and an individual's immoral acts. They argue that in addition to the violation of social norms (Cooper & Fazio, 1984), when individuals behave in ways contrary to their own belief and values (Aronson, 1992; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992) and additionally are responsible for behaving in ways that threaten their self-integrity (Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993; Steele, 1988), dissonance is even more likely (Barkan et. al., 2012; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2012).

#### *Dissonance Reduction by Policymakers*

Both the “self-generated risks” and “global catastrophic potential” of *WRS* appear particularly likely generate dissonance. Associated with each of these are dissonance reduction strategies designed to alleviate the attendant psychological discomfort. These have also been noted by scholars as aspects of the policymaking and management process. When formulating policies in dissonance-arousing contexts, decision makers are generally more likely to avoid inconsistent information or to distort information to make it consistent with their views or preferred policies. When a serious risk becomes a reality (e.g. Fukushima), or becomes a prominent feature of political discourse (e.g. global warming), dissonance reduction techniques such as denying culpability will be most prominent (Gosling, Denizeau, & Oberlé 2006). Dissonance reduction offers another perspective on “blame avoidance behaviour” by policymakers (Hinterleitner & Sager 2015; Hood 2010; Waever 1986). While the “blame game” results from a wide variety of organisational, political, and even individual difference factors (Boin et al., 2010), dissonance and its reduction can help to account for some of the underlying psychological dynamics that lead individuals to deny personal responsibility for failures and mistakes. Although such denials and rationalisations can be politically-motivated, there is some recent evidence that the desire to reduce dissonance can actually result in false memories (Rodriguez & Strange 2015), giving another plausible

psychological explanation for why policymakers might claim to have supported (or opposed) policies that they in fact did not.

Additionally, there will be efforts to deny or diminish the magnitude of negative consequences, and decision-makers may engage in systematic rationalisations in order to justify their policies or reduce negative reactions to their decisions. Dissonance can motivate policymakers to alter their view of harmful consequences, making them seem less negative, as ‘...the motivation for dissonance reduction arises from the perception of aversive consequences and that changes of attitudes that generally follow from dissonance arousal are at the service of rendering those consequences nonaversive’ (Cooper, 1999: 150). The Bush administration, for example, grossly underestimated costs of invading Iraq in advance of the actual invasion (The Guardian 2013), despite credible higher estimates available at the time. After the invasion, when the swift victory and ‘mission accomplished’ sensibilities began to fade in the face of stiff resistance in Iraq, the administration continued to minimize the sense of negative consequences, such as by offering low estimates of Iraqi casualties (The Washington Post 2005).

### *Negative Impacts on Decision-Making Processes*

In general the nature of decision-making mistakes prompted by dissonance and its reduction should not be dissimilar to those already familiar to scholars of policymaking. Dissonance reduction will most often result in some level of distortion of information, selective information avoidance, and various other techniques for re-aligning inconsistencies among beliefs, preferences, and behaviours. But given the nature of policymaking described by *WRS*, we can see some aspects of these types of mistakes in a new light.

The “linear rationality” of modernity focuses on achieving objectives by applying means toward ends, and thus one noted mistake is failing to survey objectives (Janis, 1972;



Schafer & Crichlow 2010). But the “reflexive rationality” of *WRS* suggests that specifying objectives and determining appropriate alternative courses of action are much broader in nature, being built around prevention of “bad outcomes”. In a sense, this places “normal” policymaking more squarely in the realm of grand strategy, with overly broad objectives and underspecified means. The challenge of addressing such ill-structured problems (Sylvan & Voss 1998) is compounded by the dissonance associated with a risk management, reflexive approach and will likely result in excessive cognitive simplifications designed to simplify ill-structured problems and to align information with a limited range of policy objectives.

Decision makers may seek experts to help overcome the complexities of a given risk, which could be viewed as a positive strategy as both *knowledge and experience* are factors that have been associated with more effective decision-making (Schafer & Crichlow, 2010). For Beck, however, risk society greatly reduces confidence in expertise, as the complexity and unpredictability of techno-scientific risks eludes expert control. The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 is illustrative, as the crisis spun out of control and the technological complexity of trying to plug the oil deep underwater gave way to hapless efforts with comical names such as ‘top kill’ and ‘junk shot’ and involved complex challenges around the use of expertise (cf. Mills & Koliba, 2015). For complex and unbounded risks ‘...there is typically little data or evidence on which to base management decision and practices, and there is little confidence that management strategies will actually reduce the risk in a tangible way’ (Handmer & James, 2007: 129).

While cognitive dissonance has generally been considered intra-personal, decision-makers rarely grapple with policymaking alone, and Beck explicitly recognizes this fact (Beck 1992:98). Festinger himself considered the social group to be a source for the experience (and alleviation) of dissonance (Festinger, 1957).<sup>8</sup> Recently scholars have connected cognitive dissonance to group dynamics (Zanna & Sande, 1987; McKimmie et al.

2009; McKimmie 2015), and studies have observed dissonance reduction through diffusion of responsibility within groups (Cooper & Stone 2000) and have found that consensus following disagreement among group members is a source of dissonance reduction (Matz & Wood 2005).<sup>9</sup> But the nature of decision-making in *WRS* may actually increase dissonance. ‘t Hart (1990) indicates that intensive competition with an out-group is likely to influence ‘...high group cohesiveness and anticipatory compliance in the face of strong leadership...[and] symptoms of groupthink, such as a belief in the inherent morality of the group and stereotypes of out-groups’ (105).<sup>10</sup> Facing crises that originate in the backlash of techno-scientific progress, however, the ability to ‘scapegoat’ the source of risk onto the ‘other’ will be difficult and implicate the self. Efforts to reduce dissonance may intensify and result in cognitive distortions that reduce personal responsibility, perhaps even by creating an ‘other’ to which negative outcomes can be attributed – such as mistaking Saddam Hussein to be colluding with al Qaida and to be the source of risks associated with weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism (Badie 2010).

## **Conclusions**

I have argued from a “process conception” of mistakes, connecting the conditions of *WRS* to the dynamics of decision-making through the vehicle of cognitive dissonance (for alternative approaches to mistakes, see [others] this issue). Alongside the behavioural and institutional changes that Beck argues accompany *WRS*, we should also consider the impact on policy decision-making dynamics, as the types of decision scenarios increasingly likely to be facing governments may fundamentally influence the “micro processes” of decision-making. Even if the *WRS* thesis is not itself fully empirically accurate (Jarvis 2007), the more recent expansion of risk bureaucracies, risk regulation regimes, and political risk analysis itself suggests that many governments are indeed taking a reactive and preventive approach to many areas of policymaking (Hood et al. 2001; Jarvis & Griffiths 2007). Connecting this

to decision-making processes highlights the possible influence of the broadest sociological context on decision-making mistakes and emphasizes different dynamics and decision pathologies that can occur when policymakers are dealing with *WRS*-type events and crises.

Other psychological approaches to the study of risk and policy decision-making exist, of course, such as framing (cf. Kahneman & Tversky 1979), individual personality differences (cf. Kowert & Hermann 1997), and cultural beliefs in relation to risk perceptions (cf. Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Dingwall 2000; Wildavsky & Dake, 1990). What has been missing is a direct connection to the more macro international context. While there has been some speculation that international features are fundamentally related to psychological processes, such as *cognitive capitalism* (Moulier-Boutang 2012), or the more general systemic effects on the information processing of foreign policy makers (Jervis 1998), little work has tried to directly connect broad sociological features to the psychological foundations of decision making mistakes. While cognitive dissonance is not itself a theory of risk or risk-taking, it is instead a more generally applicable theory of how people respond to inconsistencies and is particularly well suited to examining “mistakes and failures” and how we deal with them (Tavris & Aronson 2008). Moreover, psychologists are beginning to reinterpret many of their findings in the light of dissonance theory, recognizing that ‘...the basic notion of cognitive consistency can integrate a wide range of social psychological phenomena that have rarely been analysed from a consistency perspective’ (Gawronski, 2012: 653; see also Gawronski & Strack, 2012). Combined with the concepts of *WRS*, then, dissonance offers a compelling connection to policy mistakes and fiascoes.

By its very nature – connecting the “macro-level” to the “micro-cognitive level” – the empirical demonstration of these effects is extremely difficult. Indeed, idiosyncratic features of any choice situation will continue to be a primary influence on the prevalence of dissonance and its reduction. Dissonance does not indicate what specific types of mistakes

decision makers are likely to make, since it does not in itself specify the nature of dissonance reduction that will be utilised in any particular situation. Individuals are relatively free to deny events, distort information to put it in line with beliefs and behaviours, bolster their beliefs, enhance their sense of self-worth or self-esteem, and even (though more rarely) change their behaviour in response to the arousal of dissonance. The gritty work of examining decision-making remains essential for scholars interested in such process explanations of policies, mistakes, and fiascos.

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of Beck's assertions regarding the 'global' nature of risks society, see Caplan 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Festinger himself was deeply interested in group dynamics, having published on it prior to his formal presentation of cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Thibau, 1951).

<sup>9</sup> Even Janis (1972) may have recognised aspects of dissonance within his concept of groupthink, and perhaps saw groupthink as a space *absent of dissonance*. He notes that the term 'groupthink' is Orwellian in origin and of the same order as terms like 'doublethink', which Orwell's book *1984* (1949/2006) presents as the ability to hold two completely contradictory beliefs in mind simultaneously and to believe them both equally without doubt or hesitation – a remarkable description of the complete absence of dissonance.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the majority of the case studies of groupthink, groupthink-avoidance, and those that have helped to move us 'beyond groupthink' are grounded in decisions that involved 'others' – that is, rooted in the linear rationality of linking means with ends against a calculating alter. Focusing on foreign policy, Schafer and Crichlow's (2010) 39 case studies only involve two that could plausibly be argued to involve a 'non-other' actor: case # 38 where the Bush administration decided to impose a steel tariff, and case #17 wherein the Reagan administration took the decision to develop the 'Strategic Defense Initiative' (SDI).