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Authors

Rutherford, Melissa D.

Tooby, John

Cosmides, Leda

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The Effect of Power on Social Reasoning

Melissa D. Rutherford, rutherford@psych.ucsb.edu

John Tooby and Leda Cosmides

Center for Evolutionary Psychology

University of California at Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara, CA 93106

We explored the activation and deactivation of a “bluff detection mechanism” in response to cues to perceived relative formidability. When one is threatened by another person, compliance is unnecessarily costly if that person is bluffing. However, if the person making the threat is more powerful than the victim, (or belongs to a coalition more powerful than the victim’s) then challenging the threat is risky because 1) the victim is less able to defend himself or herself and 2) the more formidable person is less likely to be bluffing. Therefore, we predicted that there should be specialized machinery designed to detect bluffs, and that this machinery may be deactivated when an individual is less formidable than an opponent. We find evidence that humans have a “bluff detection mechanism” which enables them to solve social reasoning problems involving bluffing when they cannot solve logically isomorphic problems. One series of studies provides evidence for the idea that women’s bluff detection mechanisms may operate differently than men’s. Men’s performance on problems involving violent threats is reliably much higher than women’s performance. However, women do well on problems involving defensive, non-violent threats, problems on which men’s performance is mediocre. We expected that because of the greater cost-benefit ratio for people who are less formidable, this bluff detection mechanism may

be “deactivated.” A second series of studies show that male athletes who have just competed perform in agreement with the model. That is, after losing an athletic competition, performance on a bluff detection problem is much worse than at baseline, even when performance on other types of social reasoning problems and other logically isomorphic problems is unaffected. Finally, a third set of studies shows that coalitional affiliation with a losing team is sufficient to produce the effect. For example, men who watch their college basketball team lose will show worse performance on bluff detection problems relative to performance before the game, and relative to performance on other types of problems after the game. Conversely, the importance of being able to detect double-crosses does not lessen as one’s relative formidability decreases. (A person is double-crossing when he harms the victim even though the victim complied with the threat.) People in relatively vulnerable positions may be at least as sensitive or perhaps more sensitive to double-cross. Our data is consistent with the notion that there is a “double-cross detection mechanism,” and that it is active in women when the bluff-detection mechanism is not. Furthermore, it appears to be active in athletes and fans when the bluff detection mechanism seems to be deactivated.