

Critical Reasoning 08 – Groupthink (Us or them)



This dystopian image of youth engaging in groupthink has been removed from a blog on the same topic

Groupthink is that phenomenon which occurs within certain groups of people where the desire for harmony or conformity within a group leads to faulty reasoning or poor decision-making outcomes. Although a construct of social psychology, groupthink is important to communication theory, political science, management, organisational theory as well as understanding certain aspects of cult behaviour. From the perspective of critical reasoning however, groupthink is especially important because it can lead otherwise intelligent groups of people to disastrous outcomes based on deviant decision-making.

The social psychologist Irving Janis first described groupthink in his book *Victims of Groupthink* (1972), updated as *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (1982). According to Janis (1972), groupthink occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because of group pressures that lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment.” (p. 9) Such pressures (or antecedents) include the need to preserve group cohesiveness, a faulty group structure and the situational context, such as panic. Typically group members try to minimize conflict and maximise loyalty by reaching consensus over decisions without critically examining alternative ideas or viewpoints. Individuals are discouraged from raising controversial issues or alternative solutions, stifling individual creativity, uniqueness and independent thinking. By isolating themselves from outside influences, dysfunctional dynamics of the “in-group” produce an “illusion of invulnerability” which significantly overrates their own decision-making abilities and correspondingly underrates those of the “out-group”.

Janis (1972) identified eight testable symptoms indicative of groupthink. They are, according to type:

Type I: Overestimations of the group - its power and morality

1. *Illusions of invulnerability* creating excessive optimism and encouraging risk taking.

2. *Unquestioned belief* in the morality of the group, causing members to ignore the consequences of their actions.

Type II: Closed-mindedness

1. *Rationalizing warnings* that might challenge the group's assumptions.
2. *Stereotyping* those who are opposed to the group as weak, evil, biased, spiteful, impotent, or stupid.

Type III: Pressures toward uniformity

1. *Self-censorship* of ideas that deviate from the apparent group consensus.
2. *Illusions of unanimity* among group members: silence is viewed as agreement.
3. *Direct pressure* to conform placed on any member who questions the group, couched in terms of "disloyalty"
4. **Mind guards** - self-appointed members who shield the group from dissenting information.

Janis (*op. cit.*) also proposed three antecedent conditions to groupthink, which are:

1. High group cohesiveness
 - **deindividuation**: group cohesiveness becomes more important than self-awareness and individual freedom of expression
2. Structural faults:
 - insulation of the group
 - lack of impartial leadership
 - lack of norms requiring methodological procedures
 - homogeneity of members' social backgrounds and ideology
3. Situational context:
 - highly stressful external threats
 - recent failures
 - excessive difficulties on the decision-making task
 - moral dilemmas

(Wikipedia: Groupthink)

In addition Kamau & Harorimana (2008 p. 341 - 348) propose that defective consensus-driven decisions result from the following information gathering and evaluative tendencies, characteristic of groupthink:

1. Incomplete survey of alternatives

2. Incomplete survey of objectives
3. Failure to examine risks of preferred choice
4. Failure to re-evaluate previously rejected alternatives
5. Poor information search
6. Selection bias in collecting information and
7. Failure to work out contingency plans. (Wikipedia: Groupthink)

Case Studies

Rather than being simply a laundry list of symptoms and causes, Janis (1971) used historical examples such as the Bay of Pigs fiasco (April 1961) and the Cuban missile crisis (October 1962) as case studies in formulating his theory of groupthink. The Bay of Pigs invasion was planned by the Eisenhower administration which sought to overthrow that of Prime Minister Fidel Castro, allocating \$13.1 million to the CIA in order to do so. When John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960 he was informed of the plan and “uncritically accepted” it. When dissenting voices such as those of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Senator J. William Fulbright attempted to raise their objections to the plan they were ignored by the Kennedy team, believing in the morality of their own plan. Ultimately, in act of self-censorship, Schlesinger toned down his misgivings. Launched from Guatemala, the invading force was defeated within a mere three days by the Cuban armed forces under the direct command of Fidel Castro. According to Janis, the Kennedy team had stereotyped Castro and the Cuban people by unquestionably accepting many of the CIA’s false assumptions, such as the ineffectiveness of Cuba’s air and armed forces and the inability of Castro to quell internal uprisings. (p. 43 - 46, 74 - 76)

Janis (p. 76) maintains that Bay of Pigs fiasco could have been averted had the Kennedy administration followed the same means of preventing groupthink adopted during the subsequent Cuban Missile Crisis, where essentially the same political leaders were involved in decision-making but had learned from their previous mistake of seriously under-rating their opponents.

Janis (1982), including several other scholars such as Raven (1998) and most recently Badie (2010) have investigated the role of groupthink in, among, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and the shift in the U.S. administration’s position on Saddam Hussein that ultimately led to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The overriding concern with historical case studies is the all too easy tendency to retrospectively cherry-pick examples that fit one’s preferred theory or model, dispensing with those that do not, and then proceed to adduce such cases as *evidence* for one’s theory. However, this was not the intention of Janis *et al.* - indeed he noted that “the evidence needed to test hypotheses about the causes of groupthink must ultimately come from field experiments and other systematic investigations specifically designed to pin down causal sequences, rather than from historical case studies.” (1982 p. 303) With that in mind, we ought to consider the empirical evidence from such studies as there are before endorsing groupthink as a *bona fide* phenomenon.

Empirical Evidence

Groupthink has proven fiendishly difficult to study in the laboratory because the experimental setting cuts groups off from the very social contexts which might otherwise promote or inhibit groupthink in the first place. (Flowers 1977) As an alternative, some researchers such as Schafer & Crichlow (1996) and Cline (1990) have responded by isolating factors antecedent to or resulting from groupthink, respectively. Park (1990) on the other hand, has performed **meta-analysis** (a statistical analysis that combines the results of multiple studies) of sixteen empirical studies that had been published on groupthink at the time. Esser (1998) meanwhile, provides a critical but promising summary of empirical research on groupthink theory.

According to Park, the studies he reviewed “resulted in only partial support of his [Janis’] hypotheses.” In particular, “despite Janis’ claim that group cohesiveness is the major necessary antecedent factor, no research has showed a significant main effect of cohesiveness on groupthink.” Similarly, the interaction between group cohesiveness and leadership style does not appear to produce groupthink symptoms (p.230) Park however does endorse a number of positive findings which indicate that:

- groupthink occurs in both small and large decision making groups within businesses, arising in part from group isolation within the business. (Huseman & Drive, 1979)
- autonomous work groups are also susceptible to groupthink symptoms in the same way as decision making groups within businesses. (Manz & Sims, 1982)
- group leaders with high power motivation create an atmospheres more susceptible to groupthink, perhaps because they share characteristics similar to leaders with a “closed” leadership style, such as a low tolerance for dissenting opinion. (Fodor & Smith, 1982)
- groups with highly dominant members “made higher quality decisions, exhibited lowered state of anxiety, took more time to reach a decision, and made more statements of disagreement/agreement.” (Callaway, Marriot & Esser 1985) Note however, that if those members who are highly dominant are also leaders with high power motivation, this would appear to contradict Fodor & Smith above.
- structural conditions of the group including, group insulation, group homogeneity, and promotional leadership were predictive of groupthink, whereas situational conditions, including group cohesion, were not predictive of groupthink . (McCauley 1989)

Esser meanwhile maintains that, “laboratory research supports the link between a lack of impartial leadership and groupthink and provides some support for the link between poor decision procedures and groupthink.” However he cautions that:

Too few laboratory studies have been conducted to reach firm conclusions regarding the remaining antecedents of groupthink and their hypothesized consequences. Clearly, the small number of laboratory tests of groupthink theory conducted in the 25 years since Janis first presented the theory has not been sufficient to provide an evaluation of each of the antecedents of groupthink, let alone an overall evaluation of the complete theory. (p. 133)

Notwithstanding, he concludes:

... I think that the heuristic contribution has been its greatest value. Groupthink theory and the results of groupthink research have undoubtedly stimulated much thought about group decision making. Groupthink research has led to several theoretical distinctions which should help clarify and develop our thinking about groupthink. (p. 138)

In the meantime groupthink theory continues to stimulate interest and its research base, though small, is growing. In sum, groupthink research is alive and well, not because it has validated groupthink theory, but because it has stimulated a growing set of testable ideas about group decision making. (p139)

Prevention

Given that groupthink *does* appear to be a real world phenomenon, though not quite in the form first set out by Janis, we ought to be as wary of groupthink clouding our judgement as we are, by now, of fallacies and cognitive biases. Indeed, on the political front and in the boardroom the stakes are especially high. Even in our less auspicious day to day lives, local decision making groups such as, town councils, school governing bodies and neighbourhood watch committees may be equally important and just as susceptible to groupthink, though not inevitable so.

Janis (1972 p. 209 - 215) himself proposed several means of preventing groupthink:

1. Leaders should assign each member the role of "critical evaluator." This allows each member to freely air objections and doubts.
2. Leaders should not express an opinion when assigning a task to a group.
3. Leaders should absent themselves from many of the group meetings to avoid excessively influencing the outcome.
4. The organization should set up several independent groups, working on the same problem.
5. All effective alternatives should be examined.
6. Each member should discuss the group's ideas with trusted people outside of the group.
7. The group should invite outside experts into meetings. Group members should be allowed to discuss with and question the outside experts.
8. At least one group member should be assigned the role of "Devil's advocate." This should be a different person for each meeting.

(Wikipedia: Groupthink)

By way of example, Janis (1982 p 148 - 153) suggests that, after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, President John F. Kennedy used "vigilant appraisal" to avoid groupthink during the subsequent Cuban missile crisis by,

- inviting outside experts to share their views and to be carefully questioned by group members

- encouraging group members to discuss potential solutions with trusted members outside the group within their respective departments
- dividing the group into various sub-groups in order to limit group cohesion, and
- deliberately absenting himself from meetings in order not to press his own opinions upon the group.

Tasks

In each of the following retrospective tasks please be wary of the hindsight bias *i.e.* the tendency to view past events as more predictable than they were before they occurred. As the saying goes, “Hindsight is 20/20,” which is really not helpful when life has to be lived forward.

I

Try to think of an example in your own life where you have made irrational decisions based on groupthink, or have been forced out of such a group, either because your opinions have threatened group identity or structure, or because you were simply asking too many of the “wrong” sort of questions. Of course, not all such cases can be attributed to groupthink; nevertheless we can use Janis’ (1972) eight symptoms of groupthink as a diagnostic tool. Even then not all symptoms will necessarily be present in each case; however it is likely that at least one, or more, such symptoms will be present from each category or type. Record these in point form.

Once you have identified such an example, see if you can recognise any of the antecedent conditions to groupthink which Janis proposed, other than high group cohesiveness, which has not been supported by empirical evidence. Once again make a written note of these. Also, see if you can remember the sorts of psychological dynamics that characterised the group’s thinking. Was everybody similarly deluded to some extent or were there certain self-appointed “mind guards” or “gate-keepers” who kept everybody in check? What was your role? Did you feel a sense of deindividuation at the time? Would you describe your experience as that of a victim? Perhaps a sketch or diagram would be more appropriate here.

Most importantly, what could you do *today* to prevent groupthink in the decision making bodies of which you are a part. Would you implement Janis’ eight recommendations? Either which way, spell them out literally!

II

Alternatively, if you have had the good fortune never to have been taken in by groupthink, try to analyse an historical example, other than the Bay of Pigs fiasco or the Cuban Missile crisis. An internet key-word search will supply you with many potential leads but you will have to delve deeper to make an actual study of such an event. *E.g.* suppose that your initial search reveals that the collapse of Swissair was due, in part, to a classic case of groupthink. From there you will have to search for descriptions and discussions of the event to make sense of it in terms the foregoing discussion of groupthink.

Hint: Be specific: choose a case study that is manageable! If you choose an overly general topic, such as the role of groupthink in the Second World War or under Apartheid you will most likely never be done with it.

As in the task above, try to diagnose groupthink in terms of Janis' (1972) eight symptoms in the main text. Once again, not all symptoms will necessarily be present in each case; however it is likely that at least one, or more, such symptoms will be present from each category or type. Record these in point form. Next, see if you can recognise any of the antecedent conditions to groupthink which Janis proposed, other than high group cohesiveness, which has not been supported by empirical evidence. Once again make a written note of these.

From your reading, can you identify who were the chief role-players and what was their function in either promoting or mitigating groupthink? What was their style of input or management during and before the crisis? Would you be prepared to speculate on the sorts of psychological dynamics that might have characterised the group's thinking? Perhaps a mind-map or explanatory diagram would be more appropriate here.

Finally, how would you have intervened to prevent groupthink in the manner of decision making that contributed to the crisis? Would you have implemented Janis' eight recommendations? Either which way, spell them out literally!

Feedback

It is not possible to provide specific feedback on either task; however there are certain general tendencies to watch out for when reviewing your project. Firstly, the tendency to view all decision making situations through the lens of groupthink: it is said that, to the man who has just invented a hammer, everything else resembles a nail. Groupthink is surprisingly common but it is by no means ubiquitous. Janis was quite specific in his criteria about just what characterises counted as groupthink. Secondly, choices that appear to have been available in hindsight might not have even been foreseeable at the time, through no error of groupthink. Thirdly, although subjectivity is necessarily an attribute of experience and recall, it is also part of the way we structure reality. Janis' proposed checks and balances on groupthink are designed to prevent any one person or persons from impressing their subjective outlook on a group. Similarly when we necessarily subjectively and selectively recall an experience of groupthink, we have to be wary of impressing our exclusive viewpoint on any appraisal thereof. In our own mind then, we should follow Janis' proposals by, at different times, assuming the roles of "critical evaluator" and "Devil's advocate," as well as discussing our experiences with trusted people before making our appraisal, lest we succumb to a kind of groupthink of one, if that is not a contradiction.

References

- BADIE, D. (2010) Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror: explaining US policy shift toward Iraq. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (4): 277 - 296
- CALLAWAY, M. R., MARRIOTT, R. G. & ESSER, J. K. (1985) Effects of dominance on group decision making: Toward a stress-reduction explanation of groupthink. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49 (4): 949 - 952
- CLINE, R. J. W. (1990) Detecting groupthink: methods for observing the illusion of unanimity. *Communication Quarterly* 38 (2): 112 - 126

- ESSER, J. K. (1998) Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* **73** (2/3): 116 - 141
- FLOWERS, M.L. (1977) A laboratory test of some implications of Janis's groupthink hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **35** (12): 888 - 896
- Fodor, E. M. & Smith, T. (1982) The power motive as an influence on group decision making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **42** (1): 178 - 185
- HUSEMAN, R.C. & DRIVE, R.W. (1979) Groupthink: Implications for small group decision making in business. In Huseman & Carroll (Eds.) *Readings in Organizational Behavior*. Allyn & Bacon : Boston, p. 100 - 110
- JANIS, I. L. (1971) Groupthink. *Psychology Today* **5** (6): 43 - 46, 74 - 76
- JANIS, I. L. (1972) *Victims of Groupthink*. Houghton Mifflin. : New York
- JANIS, I. L. (1982) *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. 2nd Ed. Houghton Mifflin. : New York
- KAMAU, C. & HARORIMANA, D. (2008) Does knowledge sharing and withholding of information in organizational committees affect quality of group decision making? *Proceedings of the 9th European Conference on Knowledge Management*. Academic Publishing: Reading
- McCAULEY, C. (1989) The nature of social influence in groupthink: compliance and internalization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **57**: 250 -260
- MANZ, C.C. & SIMS, H.P. (1982) The potential for "groupthink" in autonomous work groups. *Human Relations* **35** (9): 773 - 784
- PARK, W.-W. (1990) A review of research on Groupthink. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* **3** (4): 229 -245
- RAVEN, B. H. (1998) Groupthink: Bay of Pigs and Watergate reconsidered. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* **73** (2/3): 352 - 361
- SCHAFER, M. & CRICLOW, S. (1996) Antecedents of groupthink: a quantitative study. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* **40** (3): 415 - 435