Groupthink

Definition: Groupthink from Dictionary of Information Science and Technology

a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action (Thorpe, 2008)

Summary Article: Groupthink from Encyclopedia of Social Psychology

Definition

Groupthink refers to decision-making groups’ extreme concurrence seeking (conformity) that is hypothesized to result in highly defective judgments and outcomes. According to Irving Janis, the inventor of the groupthink concept, decision-making groups are most likely to experience groupthink when they operate under the following conditions: maintain high cohesion, insulate themselves from experts, perform limited search and appraisal of information, operate under directive leadership, and experience conditions of high stress with low self-esteem and little hope of finding a better solution to a pressing problem than that favored by the leader or influential members.

When present, these antecedent conditions are hypothesized to foster the extreme consensus-seeking characteristic of groupthink. This in turn is predicted to lead to two categories of undesirable decision-making processes. The first category, traditionally labeled symptoms of groupthink, includes illusion of invulnerability, collective rationalization, stereotypes of outgroups, self-censorship, mindguards, and belief in the inherent morality of the group. The second category, typically identified as symptoms of defective decision making, involves the incomplete survey of alternatives and objectives, poor information search, failure to appraise the risks of the preferred solution, and selective information processing. Not surprisingly, extremely defective decision-making performance by the group is predicted.

History and Social Significance

Irving Janis proposed the term groupthink to describe group decision fiascos that occurred in such cases as the appeasement of Nazi Germany by Great Britain at the beginning of World War II; the failure of the U.S. military to anticipate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which served to bring the United States into World War II; then President of the United States Harry Truman's decision to escalate the war in North Korea, which resulted in Communist China's entry into the war and a subsequent military stalemate; then President of the United States John Kennedy's decision to send Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro by invading Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, resulting in the death of 68 exiles and the capture of an additional 1,209; and then President of the United States Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam, counter to the warnings of intelligence experts.

Janis developed his list of antecedents and consequences of groupthink by comparing the social processes that occurred in these decisions with the successful group decisions in the cases of the development of the Marshall Plan for distributing U.S. aid in Europe after World War II and the use of threats and rewards by the Kennedy administration to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba in what has become known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

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The concept of groupthink became a hit with the general public. Just 3 years after the term was introduced, it appeared in the *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, which defined *groupthink* as "conformity to group values and ethics." Thus, in the popular imagination, groupthink has come to mean any conformity within a group setting. (Of course, Janis's original formulation involves much more than just conformity or going along with the group.) The concept of groupthink was also a hit within the academic literature, frequently appearing in textbooks in social psychology and organizational management.

There was just one problem with this popularity: Empirical research on the concept has produced overwhelmingly equivocal support for the groupthink model. Researchers have attempted to apply the groupthink framework to new case examples, such as Nazi Germany's decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941, Ford Motor Company's decision to market the Edsel, Chemie Grünenthal's decision to market the drug thalidomide, the tragedy at Kent State University during the Vietnam War, the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster, the Space Shuttle *Columbia* disaster, and the City of Santa Cruz's decision not to prepare for an earthquake. It is rare in these case studies to find the constellation of antecedents and consequences proposed by Janis. Researchers have also attempted to produce groupthink in the laboratory using the experimental method. These experiments, which manipulated such variables as group cohesion, directive leadership, and stress, created ad hoc groups that were required to make group decisions. With one notable exception (discussed in the next section), these experiments have not been able to produce the defective decision making associated with groupthink.

**Current Evidence for a Social Identity Maintenance Model**

Given the equivocal results of empirical groupthink research, some have called for the abandonment of the groupthink concept. Marlene Turner and Anthony Pratkanis took a different approach of attempting to redefine key groupthink concepts in order to first produce them experimentally in the lab and then use those concepts to clarify conflicting results in case examples. In this model of groupthink, termed the *social identity maintenance* (SIM) model, groupthink occurs when members attempt to maintain a shared positive image of the group (e.g., "the Kennedy White House," "NASA," or "progressive City of Santa Cruz"), and that positive image is subsequently questioned by a collective threat (e.g., no good solution to the Bay of Pigs, pressures to launch a space shuttle, financial pressures of retrofitting for an earthquake). In such cases, the group tends to focus on how it can maintain the shared positive image of the group and not the specific task of making a good decision in the situation.

Turner and Pratkanis experimentally tested the SIM model of groupthink by asking groups of three persons to solve a difficult problem involving the falling productivity of a group of assembly station workers. Half of the groups were given a unique social identity (e.g., a group label such as Eagles or Cougars) and then asked to list the similarities among the group members. The other groups were not given labels and asked to discuss their dissimilarities. In addition, half of the groups were informed that their group would be videotaped and, more critically, were told that their videotapes would be used for training purposes in both classes held on campus and training sessions held in local corporations. Thus, failure at the task would in fact involve direct negative consequences for the group that would threaten a positive image of the group. The results showed that the groups who were given a social identity and who were operating under threat performed poorly at decision making, consistent with the expectations of a SIM of groupthink.

The SIM model of groupthink has also been tested using real-world case examples. For example, in a
case analysis of how the city council of Santa Cruz, California, made decisions regarding earthquake safety prior to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake disaster that devastated the city, Turner and Pratkanis found that the city council had a strong social identity as a progressive, humane governing body and that that image was threatened by a state-mandated earthquake preparedness plan. An examination of the proceedings of the city council on earthquake preparedness showed all of the classic antecedents and consequences of groupthink (as originally proposed by Janis) as well as defective decision making.

See also
Decision Making; Group Decision Making; Group Dynamics; Group Polarization

Further Readings

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