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### C. Psychology & Education

#### GROUPTHINK AND GROUP DYNAMICS: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF DEFECTIVE POLICY DECISIONS\*

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#### *Risky Group Decisions*

Year after year newscasts and newspapers inform us of gross miscalculations by groups of policy makers in local, state and federal governments. Most people, when they hear about these fiascoes, simply remind themselves that, after all, "organizations are run by human beings," "to err is human," and "nobody is perfect." But platitudinous thoughts about human

\*This article is adapted from the author's recent book, *VICTIMS OF GROUPTHINK: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF FOREIGN-POLICY DECISIONS AND FIASCOES* (Houghton-Mifflin). A contrary perspective is provided in Alexander George's "The Case for Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy," 66 *AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW* 751 (1972).

nature do not help us to understand how and why avoidable miscalculations are made.

Fiasco watchers who are unwilling to set the problem aside in this easy fashion will find that contemporary psychology has something to say (unfortunately not very much) about excessive risk taking and other sources of human error. The deficiencies about which we know the most pertain to disturbances in the behavior of each individual in a decision-making group – temporary states of elation, fear, or anger that reduce a person's mental efficiency; chronic blind spots arising from a person's social prejudices; shortcomings in information-processing that prevent a person from comprehending the complex consequences of a seemingly simple policy decision. One psychologist has suggested that because the information-processing capabilities of every individual are limited, no responsible leader of a large organization ought to make a policy decision without using a computer that is programmed to spell out all the probable benefits and costs of each alternative under consideration. The usual way of trying to counteract the limitations of individuals' mental functioning, however, is to relegate important decisions to groups.

Groups, like individuals, have shortcomings. Groups can bring out the worst as well as the best in man. For example, subtle constraints, which the leader may reinforce inadvertently, may prevent a member from fully exercising his critical powers and from openly expressing doubts about a risky course of action when most others in the group appear to have reached a consensus. In order to take account of what is known about the causes and consequences of such constraints we must draw upon some of the main findings of research on group dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

The use of theory and research on group dynamics is intended to supplement, not to replace, the standard approaches to the study of political decision-making. Group dynamics is still in the early stages of scientific development, and much remains to be learned. At present there are only a few concepts and generalizations in which we can have confidence when we are trying to understand the behavior of policy-making groups. Social scientists concerned with policy-making in the government – most notably, Karl Deutsch, Alexander George, and Joseph de Rivera – have started to use group dynamics concepts that hold the promise of enriching political science.<sup>2</sup> The rapprochement between the two fields, however, is still mainly a perspective for the future rather than a current reality. In the sections that follow, I shall summarize the conclusions from my intensive case studies of major fiascoes resulting from excessively risky decisions made by policy-making groups, which may help to concretize and give added impetus to this new development within the social sciences.

### **Groupthink**

Over and beyond all the familiar sources of human error is a powerful source of defective judgment that arises in cohesive groups of decision makers – the *concurrency-seeking* tendency, which fosters overoptimism, lack of vigilance, and sloganistic thinking about the weakness and immorality of out-groups. This tendency can take its toll even when the policy-makers are conscientious statesmen trying to make the best possible decisions for their country. I use the term "groupthink" as a quick and easy way to refer to the mode of thinking that group members engage in

when they are dominated by the concurrence-seeking tendency, when their strivings for unanimity override their motivation to appraise the consequences of their actions.

The groupthink hypothesis occurred to me while reading Arthur M. Schlesinger's chapters on the Bay of Pigs in *A Thousand Days*.<sup>3</sup> At first, I was puzzled: How could bright, shrewd men like John F. Kennedy and his advisers be taken in by the CIA's stupid, patchwork plan? I began to wonder whether some kind of psychological contagion, similar to social conformity phenomena observed in psychological studies of small groups, had interfered with their mental alertness. When I re-read Schlesinger and examined other accounts, I was struck by many further observations that fit into exactly the pattern of concurrence-seeking that has impressed me in my research on other face-to-face groups when a "we" feeling of solidarity is running high. I concluded that a group process was subtly at work in Kennedy's team which prevented the members from debating the real issues posed by the C.I.A.'s plan and from carefully appraising its serious risks.<sup>4</sup> Then I started to look into similar historical fiascoes, that occurred during the administrations of three other American presidents: Franklin D. Roosevelt (failure to be prepared for Pearl Harbor), Harry S. Truman (the invasion of North Korea) and Lyndon B. Johnson (escalation of the Vietnam war).<sup>5</sup> Each decision was a group product, issuing from a series of meetings held by a small and cohesive group of government officials and advisers. In each case I found the same kind of detrimental group process that was at work in the Bay of Pigs decision.

I was surprised by the extent to which the groups involved in these fiascoes adhered to group norms and pressures toward uniformity, even when their policy was working badly and had unintended consequences that disturbed the conscience of the members. Members consider loyalty to the group the highest form of morality. That loyalty requires each member to avoid raising controversial issues, questioning weak arguments or calling a halt to soft-headed thinking.

Eight main symptoms run through the case studies of historic fiascoes. Each symptom can be identified by a variety of indicators, derived from historical records, observer's accounts of conversations, and participants' memoirs. The eight symptoms of groupthink are:

1. an illusion of invulnerability, shared by most of all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks;
2. collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions;
3. an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions;
4. stereotyped views of rivals and enemies as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes;
5. direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments,

making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members;

6. self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments;
7. a shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent);
8. the emergence of self-appointed mindguards – members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

At present we do not know what percentage of all national fiascoes are attributable to groupthink. Some decisions of poor quality that turn out to be fiascoes might be ascribed primarily to mistakes made by just one man, the chief executive. Others arise because of a faulty policy formulated by a group of executives whose decision-making procedures were impaired by errors having little or nothing to do with groupthink. All that can be said from the case studies I have analyzed so far is that groupthink tendencies sometimes play a major role in producing large-scale fiascoes.

### **Theory**

The central theme of my analysis can be summarized in this generalization, which I offer in the spirit of Parkinson's laws: The more amiability and esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups.

I do not mean to imply that all cohesive groups suffer from groupthink, though all may display its symptoms from time to time. A group whose members have properly defined roles, with traditions and standard operating procedures that facilitate critical inquiry, is probably capable of making better decisions than any individual in the group who works on the problem alone. And yet the advantages of having decisions made by groups are often lost because of psychological pressures that arise when the members work closely together, share the same values, and above all face a crisis situation in which everyone is subjected to stresses that generate a strong need for affiliation. In these circumstances, as conformity pressures begin to dominate, groupthink and the attendant deterioration of decision-making set in. The greater the threat to the self-esteem of the members of a cohesive group, the greater will be their inclination to resort to concurrence-seeking at the expense of critical thinking. Symptoms of groupthink will therefore be found most often when a decision poses a moral dilemma, especially if the most advantageous course requires the policymakers to violate their own standard of ethical behavior. Each member is likely to become more dependent than ever on the in-group for maintaining his self-image as a decent human being and will therefore be more strongly motivated to maintain group unity by striving for concurrence.

Although it is risky to make huge inferential leaps from theory to practice, we should not be inhibited from drawing tentative inferences. Perhaps the worst mistakes can be prevented if we take steps to avoid the

circumstances in which groupthink is most likely to flourish. The prime condition repeatedly encountered in case studies of the fiascoes is *group cohesiveness*. Two additional conditions are suggested by comparing the fiascoes with well-worked out decisions (the Marshall Plan and the Cuban missile crisis).<sup>6</sup> One condition is *insulation* of the decision-making group from the judgments of qualified associates who, as outsiders, are not permitted to know about the new policies under discussion until after a final decision has been made. Another condition suggested by comparative case studies is *authoritarian leadership*: The more actively the leader of a cohesive policy-making group promotes his own preferred solution, the greater are the chances of a consensus based on groupthink, even when the leader does not want the members to be yes-men and the individual members try to resist conforming.

### **Preventing Groupthink**

The problem of preventing costly miscalculations and lapses from rational thinking in decision-making bodies is complicated: How can policy-makers benefit from the cohesiveness of their group without suffering serious losses from groupthink? This sort of intricate psychological issue has been called a pretzel-shaped question and it may require pretzel-shaped answers.

What is urgently needed is a new type of intervention research, in which experienced executives familiar with the policy-making system from the inside and a variety of specialists familiar with various decision-making processes from the outside collaborate to develop viable improvements. If this type of enterprise materializes, one line of intervention research might be devoted to testing plausible recommendations, inferred from tentative generalizations about the conditions under which groupthink flourishes, for improving the quality of executive decision-making.

From my analysis of the conditions that foster groupthink I have suggested the following nine prescriptive hypotheses, all of which must be validated before they can be applied with any confidence. In my opinion, despite potential drawbacks, they warrant the trouble and expense of being tested as potentially useful means for partially counteracting groupthink whenever a small number of executives in any organization meet with their chief executive to work out new policies. Certain of the anti-groupthink procedures might also help to counteract initial biases of the members, prevent pluralistic ignorance, and eliminate other sources of error that can arise independently of groupthink.

1. The leader of a policy-forming group should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to airing objections and doubts. This practice needs to be reinforced by the leader's acceptance of criticism of his own judgments in order to discourage the members from soft-pedaling their disagreements.

2. The leaders in an organization's hierarchy, when assigning a policy-planning mission to a group, should be impartial instead of stating preferences and expectations at the outset. This practice requires each leader to limit his briefings to unbiased statements about the scope of the problem and the limitations of available resources, without advocating specific proposals he would like to see adopted. This allows the conferees the

opportunity to develop an atmosphere of open inquiry and to explore impartially a wide range of policy alternatives.

3. The organization should routinely follow the administrative practice of setting up several independent policy-planning and evaluation groups to work on the same policy question, each carrying out its deliberations under a different leader.

4. Throughout the period when the feasibility and effectiveness of policy alternatives are being surveyed, the policy-making group should from time to time divide into two or more subgroups to meet separately, under different chairmen, and then come together to hammer out their differences.

5. Each member of the policy-making group should discuss periodically the group's deliberations with trusted associates in his own unit of the organization and report back their reactions.

6. One or more outside experts or qualified colleagues within the organization who are not core members of the policy-making group should be invited to each meeting on a staggered basis and should be encouraged to challenge the views of the core members.

7. At every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, one or more members should be assigned the role of devil's advocate. In order to avoid domesticating and neutralizing the devil's advocates, the group leader will have to give each of them an unambiguous assignment to present his arguments as cleverly and convincingly as he can, like a good lawyer, challenging the testimony of those advocating the majority position. The most effective performers in the role are likely to be those who can be truly devilish by raising new issues in a conventional, low-key style, asking questions such as, "Haven't we perhaps overlooked. . .?"

8. Whenever the policy issue involves relations with a rival nation or organization, a sizable bloc of time (perhaps an entire session) should be spent surveying all warning signals from the rivals and constructing alternative scenarios of the rivals' intentions.

9. After reaching a preliminary consensus about what seems to be the best policy alternative, the policy-making group should hold a "second chance" meeting at which every member is expected to express as vividly as he can all his residual doubts and to rethink the entire issue before making a definitive choice.

### ***Tooling Up For Innovations***

Imaginative workers in the new field of research on policy-making procedures might be able to develop the equivalent of a wind tunnel for a series of trial runs to pretest various anti-groupthink procedures before going to the expense of setting up a field test. Then, a collaborative team made up of practical-minded men from inside the organization working with behavioral scientists who spend enough time tooling up to understand what the insiders tell them ought to be able to find a relatively painless way to carry out field studies to assess the long-run effectiveness of the most promising innovative procedures. The objective evaluations made by a team of administrators and behavioral scientists could weed out ineffective and harmful procedures and provide solid evidence to keep the good ones going.

By accumulating systematic evidence, they could contribute to the transformation of rational policy-making from a haphazard art into a cumulative science. In the absence of sound evaluation studies, improvements in decision-making procedures have a chancy existence and often get lost in the shuffle of changing personnel at the top of the organization. The better the evidence showing that a given innovation is effective in a variety of different organizations and at all levels of management, the more confidence everyone can have that the prescription is a valid generalization and the better the chances are that it will be retained when new top executives replace those who initiated the change.

### **Conclusion**

Awareness of the shared illusions, rationalizations, and other symptoms fostered by the interaction of members of small groups may curtail the influence of groupthink in policy-making groups, including those that meet in the White House. Here is another place where we can apply George Santayana's well-known adage: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Perhaps a better understanding of group dynamics among government leaders will help them avoid being condemned to repeat the fiascos of the recent past.

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- <sup>2</sup>For a comprehensive survey indicating how group dynamics can be applied to the study of policy making, see J. De Rivera's *THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF FOREIGN POLICY*. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1968.
- <sup>3</sup>A. M. Schlesinger Jr., *A THOUSAND DAYS*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- <sup>4</sup>A detailed case study of the Bay of Pigs decision is presented in Chapter 2 of I. L. Janis's *VICTIMS OF GROUPTHINK*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
- <sup>5</sup>Detailed case studies of the three historic fiascos are presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of I. L. Janis's *VICTIMS OF GROUPTHINK*.
- <sup>6</sup>Detailed case studies of the Marshall plan and the Cuban Missile Crisis are presented in Chapters 6 and 7 of I. L. Janis's *VICTIMS OF GROUPTHINK*.

## **SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION**

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Whether the social scientist is well advised to involve himself in policy research is still an open question. Kaplan outlines the following positions

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