

Twenty-Five Years of Groupthink Theory and Research: Lessons from the Evaluation of a Theory

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In this paper, we examine the historical development of the groupthink model and discuss recent responses to the body of empirical evidence amassed on the model. We conclude by articulating general lessons implied by the evolution of research on the groupthink model. © 1998 Academic Press

Groups enthrall us with their ability to amplify the range of individual achievements. On the one hand, groups provide us with the opportunity to reach heights far greater than any individual might accomplish. Yet, groups also entail considerable risk for they also have the potential to produce unimaginable destruction. Explaining why these outcomes occur has been a daunting task for social and organizational researchers.

A quarter of a century ago, Irving Janis proposed a theory to help answer at least some of these questions. That theory, groupthink, would go on to be one of the most influential in the behavioral sciences. Janis's classic formulation (Janis, 1972, 1982) as well as his more recent reformulation (see, for example, Janis, 1989) hypothesizes that decision making groups are most likely to experience groupthink when they are highly cohesive, insulated from experts, perform limited search and appraisal of information, operate under directed leadership,

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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, traditionally labeled symptoms of groupthink, include illusion of invulnerability, collective rationalization, stereotypes of outgroups, self-censorship, mindguards, and belief in the inherent morality of the group. The second, typically identified as symptoms of defective decision-making, involve 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, these combined forces are predicted to result in extremely defective decision making performance by the group.

The range of the groupthink theory is breathtaking. Groupthink is one of the few social science models that has had a truly interdisciplinary impact. For example, even a cursory scan of the literatures in political science, communications, organizational theory, social psychology, management, strategy, counseling, decision science, computer science, information technology, engineering management, health care, and marketing reveals the pervasive appeal and influence of the groupthink concept. Indeed, the concept of groupthink has also captured the imagination of the general public. Clearly, then, groupthink has had a powerful impact on an enormous variety of literatures. Indeed, as early as 1975, merely 3 years after the publication of Janis's 1972 volume, the term groupthink appeared in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. The entry reads:

group·think . . . *n* [¹*group* + *-think* (as in *doublethink*)] : conformity to group values and ethics

Few social science models can claim to have such an impact. It is fitting, then, after 25 years of groupthink theory and research, we appraise groupthink, its history, and its future.

The purpose of this special issue is to codify and integrate the many diverse perspectives on groupthink that have appeared over the past two and a half decades and to critically appraise the concept, its contributions, and its potential. The issue draws together researchers from a variety of social science disciplines who examine groupthink theory and research from their unique perspectives and develop extraordinarily wide-ranging implications. The papers in this volume represent the full range of opinion on groupthink. Perhaps what is most intriguing about this volume is that each paper relies on identical evidence to marshal its theoretical arsenal. However, as Janis (1982) would suggest, evidence, like groupthink, is eminently interpretable in a variety of ways. Indeed, the views of groupthink are at once provocative and frequently contradictory.

To place groupthink in context, we first provide a brief history of this research

and then go on to examine how the papers in this volume reflect the current state of groupthink theory and research.

TRACING THE HISTORY OF GROUPTHINK RESEARCH

Empirical Research on Groupthink: Why So Little?

Undoubtedly, groupthink speaks to the intuitive scientist in us. Janis's introduction of the concept in 1972 spawned a tidal wave of attention from textbook writers in social psychology and management. Likewise, the concept captured the imagination of the media and press, providing, as it did, comprehensible explanations for some of the major decision fiascos of the time, such as the Bay of Pigs decision, Watergate, the Viet Nam War escalation decision, Pearl Harbor, and so forth. After two and a half decades, that popularity persists today. Groupthink has been applied to such novel group decisions as Nazi Germany's decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941, Israel's lack of preparedness for the October 1973 war, Ford Motor Company's decision to market the Edsel, Gruenenthal Chemie's decision to market the drug thalidomide (Raven & Rubin, 1976), NASA's decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle (Aronson, 1988; Esser & Lindoerfer, 1989; Moorhead, Ference, & Neck, 1991); the Watergate cover-up (Cline, 1994), the Carter Administration's decision to use military measures to rescue Iranian hostages (Ridgeway, 1983; Smith, 1984), and the South Moluccan hostage taking (Rosenthal & Hart, 1989).

Yet, despite this popularity, there is a disturbing irony about the history of research that followed the publication of Janis's original model: Groupthink has been the subject of less than two dozen empirical investigations. In other words, roughly one empirical study per year has been conducted on the concept. Compare this to the volume of research that has been conducted on other topics such as cognitive dissonance, attribution, participation, elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, or even the sleeper effect in persuasion. Thus, groupthink, despite its overwhelming appeal and its widespread impact, has been examined empirically in only an extremely limited fashion.

There are several possible reasons why groupthink has been neglected in empirical research. First, group research is notoriously difficult to conduct, as noted by Steiner and others. Further, the groupthink model exacerbates this situation because it involves relatively large numbers of independent and dependent variables and because its theoretical specifications are generally quite ambiguous. The sheer number of variables inflates the power requirements of controlled experimental research and poses coding complexities for archival case research.

More troublesome are theoretical ambiguities characteristic of the groupthink theory. Recent theoretical reviews suggest that at least three interpretations of the model can be drawn from groupthink work (see further Turner, Pratkanis, Probasco, & Leve, 1992). A "strict" interpretation of the groupthink theory holds that groupthink should occur only when *all* the antecedent conditions are present. An "additive" interpretation suggests that groupthink should

become increasingly more pronounced as the *number* of antecedent conditions increases. However, no published studies provide evidence for either of these interpretations. A third interpretation of the groupthink model, the liberal or particularistic, is more consistent with current evidence. This perspective suggests that groupthink outcomes will depend on the unique situational properties invoked by the *particular* set of antecedent conditions found in each groupthink situation.

Moreover, the conceptualizations of the antecedents and consequences of groupthink are likewise equivocal; consequently, operationalizations are left unspecified by the theory. Thus, researchers have little (or even conflicting) guidance from the theory about how to either operationalize experimental variables or code archival data. Thus, just how to translate theoretical concepts into observable and measurable constructs becomes a source of heated debate. All of these combine to make groupthink a difficult topic for research. Yet, despite these difficulties, certain commonalities have emerged.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF GROUPTHINK: THE THREE PHASES OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

As with many new theoretical developments, groupthink research can be segmented into roughly three phases corresponding to Feynman's discussion of research progress (Feynman, 1985). In the first phase, following the introduction of the concept, research is concerned with direct tests of the model. The second phase revolves around extensions of the model, whereas the third centers on reformulations.¹

Phase 1: Direct Tests of the Model

Research following the introduction of the groupthink model focused on empirical tests of the model. The initial case studies centered on analyzing classic and novel group decisions for evidence of groupthink (e.g., Tetlock, 1979). Experimental studies were concerned with developing operationalizations of key dependent variables. Prime among these variables was the construct of cohesion. Cohesion was largely operationalized using the Lott and Lott (1966) approach to cohesion as mutual attraction. Other studies examined the role of directive leadership style. Although this construct was operationalized in a variety of fashions, most incorporated some form of limitation on group discussion. Archival studies examined new case examples of groupthink and reanalyzed some original cases. In general, these two streams of investigations provided equivocal support for the groupthink model. In general, cohesion as operationalized as mutual attraction had little effects on group outcomes, whereas instructing group members to limit their discussion generally resulted,

¹In the following sections, we briefly discuss each phase of research and allude to empirical findings. For a more exhaustive review, see the contributions in this volume as well as Aldag and Fuller (1992), Park (1990), and Turner *et al.* (1992).

not surprisingly, in members thereby constricting their discussions (e.g., Callaway & Esser, 1984; Courtwright, 1978; Flowers, 1977; Leana, 1985). Archival research (e.g., Raven, 1974; Tetlock, 1979; Esser & Lindoerfer, 1989; Hensley & Griffin, 1986) provided some support but also raised some critical questions regarding the operationalization of key constructs and processes. In general, these studies provided largely equivocal support for the groupthink model. This resulted in strong critiques of the concept and more attention to revisions of the model (e.g., Longley & Pruitt, 1980; Steiner, 1982).

Phase 2: Extensions of the Model

Partially in response to the failure to find complete support for the groupthink model, research began to examine the effects of additional antecedent variables on groupthink processes. For example, Fodor and Smith (1982) examined the effects of power motivation on groupthink outcomes. Kroon and colleagues (Kroon, t Hart, & van Kreveld, 1991; Kroon, van Kreveld, & Rabbie, 1992) investigated the effects of accountability and gender on groupthink, whereas Kameda and Sugimori (1993) considered how decision rules might affect groupthink symptoms and processes. Once again, however, this research demonstrated the intricacies of attempting to produce the full constellation of groupthink effects.

Phase 3: Reformulation of the Model

Not surprisingly, in view of the lukewarm support for the model, subsequent work tended to focus on refocusing and reformulation of the model. For example, t Hart developed the concept of groupthink as collective optimism and collective avoidance (t Hart, 1998). Moorhead, Ference, and Neck (1991) used the space shuttle Challenger disaster to underscore the importance of timing in groupthink processes. Turner *et al.* (1992) used the concept of social identity maintenance to examine groupthink. Whyte (1989) examined the role of risk and choice shifts whereas McCauley (1989) considered the impact of conformity and compliance pressures in groupthink decisions.

GROUPTHINK RESEARCH: THE STATE OF THE FIELD

It is clear from the previous discussion that empirical evidence for the groupthink model has been equivocal. Recent reviews of groupthink research draw three major conclusions regarding the state of the groupthink theory. First, case and laboratory research rarely document the full constellation of groupthink effects. For example, although Tetlock (1979) and Janis (1972, 1982) provide some support for the full groupthink model, both recent and classic case analyses demonstrate that groupthink can occur in situations where only a limited number of antecedents can be discerned (see, for example, Raven, 1974; Longley & Pruitt, 1980; t Hart, 1998; for reviews see Aldag & Fuller, 1993; Esser 1998, Park, 1990). Other studies suggest that groupthink is not apparent

when even most of the antecedents conditions exist (e.g., Neck & Moorhead, 1992). Likewise, laboratory studies, although they have experimentally manipulated only a few groupthink antecedents, rarely provide supporting evidence for the full groupthink model (see for example, Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway, Marriott, & Esser, 1985; Flowers, 1977; Leana, 1985). Thus, when laboratory experiments find evidence for groupthink, it tends to be partial—for example, finding that directive leadership does limit discussion but that this does not interact with cohesion and ultimately does not affect other decision processes.

Moreover, both laboratory and case research provide conflicting findings regarding the adequacy of conceptualizations of antecedents. For example, laboratory experiments as well as analyses of both the Nixon White House (Raven, 1974) and the Challenger space shuttle decision (Esser & Lindoerfer, 1989) found little evidence for the traditional conception of cohesion as mutual attraction (see Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway *et al.*, 1985; Flowers, 1977; Fodor & Smith, 1982; Leana, 1985). Despite its prominence in most groupthink case studies, threat, as operationalized in laboratory experiments, rarely has had any consequences for any group decision making outcomes or processes (see Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway *et al.*, 1985; Flowers, 1977; Fodor & Smith, 1982; Leana, 1985).

Second, few experimental studies have documented the end result and the hallmark of groupthink: the low quality, defective decisions. For example, studies investigating the effects of cohesion and leadership style show no adverse effects on performance (Flowers, 1977; Fodor & Smith, 1982; Leana, 1985). Studies investigating the effects of social cohesion and discussion procedures (e.g., restricted vs. participatory discussion) similarly provide no evidence of impaired decision performance under groupthink conditions (Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway *et al.*, 1985; Courtwright, 1978).

A third conclusion drawn from groupthink research is that questionable support has been provided for the causal sequences associated with the original model. No research has supported the hypothesized links among the five antecedents, the seven groupthink symptoms, and the eight defective decision making symptoms.

RESPONSES TO GROUPTHINK RESEARCH: REJECTION, REFORMULATION, REVITALIZATION

The equivocal support for the groupthink theory leads to what Greenwald and Ronis (1981) term the disconfirmation dilemma. In short, is the failure to completely replicate the groupthink effect a result of poor theoretical specifications, poor research design, or a combination of both?

Not surprisingly, taken together, these findings have fostered a variety of evaluations regarding the viability of the groupthink theory. These opinions range from outright rejection to reconceptualization of key antecedents to revitalizing the concept to meet the requirements of current situations. The papers in this volume reflect these diverse perspectives.

Rejection of the Groupthink Model: Pessimism about the Findings

One view of groupthink holds that the model has indeed outlived its usefulness. In their paper for this issue, Fuller and Aldag (1998) argue for this point of view, suggesting that the limited evidence for the complete groupthink theory offsets any potential usefulness of the model. They detail a number of conditions hypothesized to lead to such widespread unconditional acceptance of the model despite the circumscribed empirical findings.

Reformulation of the Groupthink Model: Reconceptualizing the Concept and the Process

A second view of groupthink suggests that the nature of the empirical evidence warrants a more fine-grained analysis of both the groupthink concept and the theoretical underpinnings of the model. In short, this perspective holds that groupthink needs to be reformulated in significant ways before attaining its purported usefulness.

In his paper for this issue, Whyte (1998) uses the concept of collective efficacy to help explain the failure of cohesion as a key antecedent variable. Similarly, Kramer (1998) suggests that other motivations, such as the motivation to maintain political power, may produce groupthink in the governmental arena. McCauley documents the historical basis of the original groupthink phenomenon and provides a counterexplanation in terms of conformity pressures. Turner and Pratkanis provide a new interpretation of groupthink in terms of social identity maintenance. Peterson *et al.* present their methodology for rigorously examining archival group decisions and develop the implications for future groupthink theoretical and empirical work.

Revitalization: Formulating Groupthink after Twenty-Five Years

Closely aligned with the previous view is the perspective that groupthink can indeed be a useful explanatory concept for both theoretical and practical reasons. In his paper, † Hart describes interventions designed to prevent groupthink outcomes. Esser reexamines groupthink findings and discusses their impact on groupthink processes. Moorhead, Neck, and West examine the intriguing potential impact of groupthink in increasingly prevalent team-based organizational environments.

GROUPTHINK AFTER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS: LESSONS FROM THE EVOLUTION OF A THEORY

What then can be said about groupthink after a quarter of a century? The papers in this volume provide an astonishing array of responses to this question. Yet, the evolution of groupthink research also provides some lessons about the conduct of science and the cumulativeness of research. We note four lessons.

Lesson 1: The Power of Intuitive Appeal

What can explain the phenomenal popularity of the groupthink model, particularly in light of the limited body of empirical evidence for the concept? The papers by both McCauley and by Fuller and Aldag convincingly argue that the intuitive appeal of the groupthink concept and the seductiveness of its formulation at times can overwhelm the scientific evidence on the topic. Groupthink is undoubtedly a concept that touches a chord within a broad spectrum of individuals. Its emergence during the turbulent 1970s likely contributed to its popularity. It is ironic that the concurrence-seeking that Janis so warned against may have played a role in the widespread acceptance of the groupthink despite the lack of a solid body of empirical evidence supporting it. Yet, on the other hand, this acceptance provides a clear message for researchers wishing to propagate their findings to a broad audience.

Lesson 2: The Criticality of Replication Research

Despite the limited number of groupthink studies, the cumulative body of evidence has important implications for research practice. As Feynman (1985) notes, extensions of any theory are predicated first upon replications of the conditions under which the phenomena are expected to occur. It is this process of replication that provides crucial information regarding the nature of the concept and the subtle nuances associated with the process of its production. Groupthink research unreservedly attests to this process. Early work attempted to replicate the groupthink process and in doing so provided invaluable insights into the conditions under which groupthink can and cannot occur.

Lesson 3: The Importance of Cumulative Controlled Designs

Part of the appeal of the groupthink model may be attributable to the notable case studies Janis used to illustrate the concept. Yet, as Janis noted (Janis, 1982), and as subsequent research demonstrated, controlled experimental designs are crucial components for delineating a theoretical phenomenon. Moreover, groupthink research provides compelling evidence that the cumulative body of research is vitally important for understanding the subtlety and intricacies of producing the phenomena.

Lesson 4: The Dangers of Unconditional Acceptance

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the evolution of groupthink theory illustrates the hazards of divorcing intuitive acceptance from scientific evaluation of a concept. As Fuller and Aldag state, the groupthink concept is most frequently unconditionally reported as fact in a variety of publications and textbooks. This divorcing of belief and scientific evaluation has unequivocal negative consequences for both the consumer of research and its practitioners. The unconditional acceptance of the groupthink phenomenon without due regard for the body of scientific evidence surrounding it leads to unthinking conformity

to a theoretical standpoint that may be invalid for the majority of circumstances. This in turn leads to a spiral of ignorance and superstition that is not easily circumvented. How incongruous that the concept warning us of the dangers of overconformity becomes a victim of that conformity.

It is our hope that the papers in this volume will serve both to document the very real contributions of the groupthink model as well as its limitations and to stimulate further research on the topic so that the concurrence-seeking that is the hallmark of groupthink becomes a phenomenon that is understood rather than emulated.

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