

Preventing Groupthink Risk through Deliberative Discussion: Further Experimental Evidence for a Social Identity Maintenance Model

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of deliberative discussion strategies in improving group performance under conditions associated with groupthink. Three-person groups solved a complex decision task in one randomly assigned condition of a 2 (collective threat: low vs. high) by 2 (deliberative discussion strategies: none vs. provided) between-subjects design. All groups were also given a manipulation designed to induce high cohesion consistent with a social identity maintenance framework. Highly cohesive groups facing a collective threat produced poorer quality decisions (indicative of groupthink) when not provided with discussion strategies than groups in all other conditions. However, when provided with deliberative discussion strategies, highly cohesive groups facing a collective threat produced the highest quality decisions. Results were consistent with the social identity maintenance model of groupthink.

Keywords: Deliberative Discussion, Group Cohesion, Group Problem-Solving, Groupthink, Risk Mitigation, Social Identity Maintenance, Team Decision Making, Threat

INTRODUCTION

Two contradictory circumstances characterize work on group effectiveness and decision making under threat and groupthink in particular. On the one hand, groupthink (Janis, 1972; 1983; 1989) can be easily identified in any number of vivid, captivating group decision making debacles. Numerous case studies have pointed to the risks and poor decision making of groups operating under groupthink. Yet, on the other hand, researchers have experienced considerable difficulty in designing the empirical

conditions that produce groupthink and in identifying interventions that might mitigate it. Thus, the groupthink model, on the surface, appears to have enormous practical implications for group decision effectiveness but the equivocal empirical results question that usefulness. In light of the contradictory empirical evidence, identification of the conditions under which groupthink occurs becomes significant. Moreover, empirically investigating methods for mitigating groupthink is likewise crucial. Not surprisingly, given the difficulty researchers have had in merely producing groupthink in

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controlled conditions, they rarely have examined the effectiveness of specific interventions in preventing or at least curtailing groupthink tendencies. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we examine the implications of one model of groupthink, the Social Identity Maintenance (SIM) model, for producing and preventing groupthink. Second, we present the results of an experiment designed to empirically investigate the capacity of one type of intervention, inducing deliberative discussion, implied by this model to mitigate groupthink when it is manifested as social identity maintenance.

Groupthink Defined

Janis's model of groupthink (Janis, 1972; 1982; 1989) holds that groups are likely to succumb to groupthink when they experience certain antecedent conditions. These antecedents include insulation of the group from experts and restricted search and appraisal of information. In addition, the group is highly cohesive, faces great stress, has a leader who is highly directive, and has a limited belief in finding a better alternative than that championed by the leader. As a result, such groups engage in excessive concurrence seeking, which results in two types of negative symptoms: symptoms of groupthink and symptoms of defective decision making. Symptoms of groupthink are comprised of behaviors that foster such negative consequences as rationalization about the effectiveness of the group and its processes, certain illusions held by the group including invulnerability and false unanimity, and other processes that produce misleading consensus such as self-censorship and censorship of others (termed mindguards). Defective decision making symptoms consist of processes generally associated with poor decision making such as the failure to conduct a full and objective search for information and to perform a complete appraisal and reappraisal of objectives, risks, solutions, alternative solutions, and contingency plans (Janis, 1972; 1982; 1989). According to Janis's groupthink model, these processes produce extremely poor team decisions.

The concept of groupthink has been applied in a variety of settings including nursing (Macleod, 2011), United States foreign policy towards Iraq (Badie, 2010), France's defeat in the 1940 campaign of World War II (Ahlstrom & Wang, 2009), temporary organizations (Hällgren, 2010), and extended space missions (Sandal, Bye, & van de Vijver, 2013). Yet, despite the intuitive charm of the groupthink concept, empirical support for Janis's model has been quite limited. Both case and laboratory research consistently fail to provide evidence supporting the conceptual framework developed by Janis (see Aldag & Fuller, 1993; Fuller & Aldag, 1998; M. E. Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). For example, cohesiveness and directive leadership have had few observed effects on any group outcomes. Most importantly for practical purposes, the poor quality decisions predicted by Janis have rarely been documented in studies investigating his traditional conceptual model. As a result, the theoretical and practical usefulness of the model has been seriously questioned. In response to this situation, M. E. Turner and Pratkanis (1998) suggest that groupthink research would benefit from taking a more nuanced approach and focus on uncovering the specific conditions associated with various manifestations of groupthink.

Redefining Groupthink: A Social Identity Maintenance Perspective

M. E. Turner and Pratkanis (M. E. Turner & Pratkanis, 1998; M. E. Turner, Pratkanis, Probasco & Leve, 1992) have developed the Social Identity Maintenance (SIM) perspective on groupthink to help reconcile the conflicting empirical evidence for groupthink. According to a SIM model, groupthink occurs when a highly cohesive group operating under stress and threat becomes concerned with maintaining a positive image of the group at the expense of making a high quality decision. In other words, groupthink is concurrence-seeking directed at sustaining and even bolstering a shared positive view of the group. Thus, for SIM groupthink to occur, two pre-requisites must be met: (a) the group must have a positive image of itself and

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