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Classics in Political Psychology

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## Irving L. Janis' Victims of Groupthink

Paul 't Hart<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

*Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* by Irving L. Janis was published for the first time in 1972. In an unprecedented way, Janis applied ideas from small-group analysis to the explanation of policy fiascoes. He made plausible the hypothesis that each of these events can, to a considerable extent, be attributed to the occurrence of a very specific and obviously detrimental phenomenon within the groups of decision-makers involved in their making. He called this phenomenon "Groupthink," cleverly picking this highly suggestive Orwellian mode of expression ("doublethink" in Orwell's novel *1984*).

According to Janis, groupthink stands for an excessive form of concurrence-seeking among members of high prestige, tightly knit policy-making groups. It is excessive to the extent that the group members have come to value the group (and their being part of it) higher than anything else. This causes them to strive for a quick and painless unanimity on the issues that the group has to confront. To preserve the clubby atmosphere, group members suppress personal doubts, silence dissenters, and follow the group leader's suggestions. They have a strong belief in the inherent morality of the group, combined with a decidedly evil picture of the group's opponents. The results are devastating: a distorted view of reality, excessive optimism producing hasty and reckless policies, and a neglect of ethical issues. The combination of these deficiencies makes these groups particularly vulnerable to initiate or sustain projects that turn out to be policy fiascoes.

Janis's study has had a major influence on students of group processes (Brown, 1989), decision-making, and management. Also, it has influenced international-relations analysts in their efforts to understand the dynamics of the

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occurrence and resolution of international crises. Here, we shall review the theory in view of its place within the field of group dynamics, the research work that followed Janis's original formulation, and the implications of groupthink research for the crucial question on the conditions that foster high- or low-quality decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

## “VICTIMS OF GROUPTHINK” AS A CLASSICAL STUDY

### Context: Psychological Approaches to Political Decision-Making

Janis's work on groupthink is one of the best-known attempts to illuminate and explain political decision-making processes using psychological concepts, theories and perspectives. As such it is part of one among several distinct paradigms in the study of politics and policy analysis.

#### *Paradigms of Political Decision-Making*

Analysis of political decision-making has long been dominated by rational-choice perspectives. In the rational view, policy decisions can be understood empirically as calculated problem-solving by key actors pursuing well-specified interests (for example, power maximization, attainment of formally stated policy goals). Normatively, the rational perspective has produced elaborate multistage models of policy-making, formulating specific tasks including problem diagnosis, information gathering, formulation of alternatives, assessment of the consequences of alternatives, choice, implementation of chosen alternative, feedback, and learning.

The rational perspective has been extensively criticized. Empirical studies of political decision-making, following the lead of Allison's (1971) study of the Cuban Missile crisis, have provided evidence casting doubt on the empirical validity of rational actor models and have begun to formulate and test alternative ones. Also, it has been argued that rationalist assumptions of perfect information, well-ordered preferences and single-actor dominance are far removed from the reality of politics and policy. This would also obstruct the usefulness of the rational perspective as a normative guideline for achieving high-quality decision-

<sup>2</sup>This article focuses solely on Janis's work in group dynamics, in particular on groupthink. It should be remarked that Janis's contribution to psychology in general and to political psychology in particular extends way beyond this. Among his major works not discussed at length in this essay, but significant for a more elaborate assessment are Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) on communication and persuasion; Janis and Mann (1977) and Janis (1989) on decision-making; Wheeler and Janis (1980) and Janis (1982) on applying decision-making analysis to daily choice situations; and the broad collection of papers in Janis (1982c).

making [see Dror (1964, 1968), Etzioni (1967), and Lindblom (1979) for classical statements of alternative normative models].

Alternatives to the rational perspective have taken many forms. One important set of alternative approaches has stressed the *political* dimensions of decision-making processes: many actors, diverse interests, interagency conflict, and ad hoc coalitions. In political models of choice, decisions are not the product of calculated choices by a government or a company as a unitary actor, but rather the outcome of a bargaining process among different players in a political-bureaucratic arena. The model of bureaucratic politics postulates that conflicts of interest and power games between different sections, departments and agencies within a government administration are the most powerful determinants of policy choices (Allison, 1971; Halperin, 1974; Rosenthal, 't Hart, & Kouzmin, 1991). The model entailed a definite break with traditional perspectives of rational decision-making and a strict separation between politics and administration. One of the most intriguing variants of the political model focuses on the empirical fact that on many occasions, the outcome of the process is such that no decisions are taken at all (non-decision-making). The analysis should then seek to explain why some social issues receive attention from policy-makers and are finally acted upon, whereas others don't. This takes the analyst to identify the social, political and bureaucratic forces and barriers that shape decision agendas (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970; Cobb and Elder, 1975; Kingdon, 1985).

Other alternatives to the rational model have stressed the importance of the *organizational* dynamics involved in political decision-making. Paradoxically, organizational models of choice have emphasized the relative unimportance of decisions (March and Shapira, 1982). Instead, they discuss the impact of routines and standard operating procedures for coping with problems (Steinbruner, 1974). Explaining the content and the dynamics of these organizational problem-solving regimes, attention is directed toward the impact of different organization structures and cultural factors as they affect choice-related problem perceptions, information and communication processes, and action propensities. In this view, a complex decision "is like a great river, drawing from its many tributaries the innumerable component premises of which it is constituted" (Simon, 1957, p. XII). The organizational perspective has found its most radical formulation in the so-called "garbage-can theory" of organizational choice (Cohen *et al.*, 1972; March, 1988). In organizations depicted as "organized anarchies," decision-making does not conform to the rationalist sequence of stages. On the contrary, at any time, there are decision opportunities that bring together various kinds of problems and solutions "lumped" by various organizational participants. Organizational choice is seen, at best, as a by-product of various independent streams of participants and activities that occasionally interact in such a manner as to match "solutions" and "problems" at a time when the opportunity for choice is there.

As studies by Allison (1971), Steinbruner (1974), Linstone (1984), and many others have shown, the different paradigms of political decision-making are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary: Each alerts the analyst to different types of actors and processes involved in decision-making. Explaining political decision-making requires, in other words, a *multi-theoretical* approach. The analytical problem is whether it is possible to develop contingency rules specifying the relative explanatory potential of various (elements of) paradigms in different types of problem settings, administrative systems, and political arenas.

### *Psychological Perspectives*

In addition to the abovementioned paradigms, psychologists studying political decision-making have provided a different line of criticisms of the rational-choice perspective, and have started to formulate yet different analytical models. Psychological research on political decision-making builds upon the work of pioneers as Lasswell, Leites, George, Simon, and March. It stresses the importance that individual capabilities and personal characteristics and propensities of *individual actors* can have on the course and outcomes of political decision-making processes. Psychological studies brought "man back in": In contrast to organizational and political paradigms that emphasize meso- and macrolevel processes, psychological studies focus on the micro-level (individual decision-makers alone and in interaction). Janis's work, not only on groupthink but also in his well-known study with Mann (1977), is part of this emerging psychological contribution to the field of political decision-making [see Holsti (1977), M. Hermann (1978), Kinder and Weiss (1978), Falkowski (1979), Hopple (1980), Jervis, (1980), Ungson and Braunstein (Ed.) (1982), Barber (1988) for overviews and discussion]. Psychological studies of political decision-making reflect different orientations and research traditions within psychology. They have focused on, among others:

Beliefs and cognitions held by decision-makers, shaping their views of the world, key actors and their importance, the nature and scope of policy problems, and the possibilities for resolution (for example: Lau and Sears, 1986; Cottam, 1986); Information-processing capabilities and dynamics, specifying different ways in which individuals cope with limitations in cognitive abilities (for example, Axelrod (Ed.), 1977; Nutt, 1988);

Emotions and motivations consciously and unconsciously affecting the attitudes and behavioral predispositions of decision-makers, including many works on the effects of psychological stress and individual coping strategies (for example, Cottam, 1977; Etheredge, 1985; see also Janis and Mann, 1977), as well psychobiographical accounts of socialization and development of the person-

alities of key politicians and bureaucrats (for example, the classic George and George, 1956);

Leadership and interpersonal style of prominent political leaders and bureaucratic entrepreneurs, specifying how key actors interact with others in their social and professional environments [for example: Lewis (1980), Doig and Hargrove (1987); elements of this approach can be found in Janis (1989)]; Group processes, focusing on the formation and dynamics of small groups as much-neglected fora of political and bureaucratic decision-making (Golembiewski, 1978).

Janis's work on groupthink fits into the latter category. In fact, it has been one of the pioneering studies in this area. At the time of its publication, it was rare in its broad interdisciplinary (social psychology, political science, history) approach and its extensive use of comparable case studies outlining the argument and developing and illustrating the theory. This methodology, as well as Janis's lucid style, made it appeal to an unusually broad audience, including many political scientists and international-relations analysis who were otherwise not inclined to consult psychological studies employing strictly experimental methods. Later on, the book was also adopted by students of organizational behavior and managerial decision-making (for example: DuBrin, 1984; Swap, 1984; Leavitt and Bahrami, 1985; Pennings *et al.*, 1985).

In this sense, Janis's study on groupthink has stimulated interdisciplinary efforts. At the same time, these very qualities have made this work vulnerable to various discipline-bound criticisms. Historians are bound to criticize the focused and potentially superficial case accounts and interpretations (Welch, 1989), and experimentally inclined psychologists will point to empirical ambiguities and difficulties in pinpointing causality due to the post hoc nature of case study research (Longley and Pruitt, 1980).

### **Research Tradition: Cohesiveness and Group Performance**

Having placed groupthink within its broader interdisciplinary context, it is time to zoom in and present in greater detail the theoretical and empirical roots of groupthink analysis. These are to be found in social psychology. Groupthink can be considered an anomalous branch on the broad tree of research on group cohesiveness and group performance that constitutes a substantive body of knowledge within group dynamics. The cohesiveness of decision-making groups is the crucial linchpin in Janis's own depiction of the dynamics of groupthink. In fact, it is the sole group-level factor that he singles out as a substantive, independent cause of groupthink.

Cohesiveness, viewed by Janis and most other small-group theorists as the extent of "sticking togetherness" of members of a group, is one of the crucial

factors in group functioning. It is also one of the most intensely researched variables in the social psychology of small groups. Perhaps partly because of its very pervasiveness, it is also one of the most elusive and multifaceted aspects of (decision) groups: there are several competing notions of cohesiveness; there are different techniques of measuring cohesiveness which do not always yield consistent results; Cohesiveness affects group behavior in numerous ways. It pervades both group structure and process, and cohesiveness factors may act as either independent, intermediate, or dependent variable. Essentially, many of the unresolved problems in the analysis of group cohesiveness reported twenty years ago by Cartwright, still exist today: How do various sources of attraction combine in a composite measure of cohesiveness, what is the importance of different sources of attraction on group cohesiveness and its subsequent effects upon group behavior, and what is the nature of causal linkages involving group cohesiveness and other aspects of group structure and process (Cartwright, 1968; see also Golembiewski, 1962; Verba, 1962; Golembiewski *et al.*, 1968; Hare, 1976)?

### *Cohesiveness and Group Members*

Just after World War II, cohesiveness research moved swiftly through the systemic efforts of Festinger, Schachter, Back, and their associates. Much of the research program on informal social communication by Festinger and his colleagues was devoted to studying group effects on individual members. The investigators, soon to be followed by a vast number of others, found that cohesive groups exert certain pressures toward uniformity upon their members. More generally, as Shaw observed, “[Groups] characterized by friendliness, cooperation, interpersonal attraction, and similar indications of group cohesiveness exert strong influence upon members to behave in accordance with group expectations. Members of cohesive groups are motivated to respond positively to others in the group, and their behavior should reflect this motivation” (Shaw, 1981, p.218). In cohesive groups, the explicit or implicit norms and standards that underlie the functioning of any collectivity, gain importance. It is held that the more cohesive the group, the more its members tend to abide by its norms of conduct.

There appears to be a compelling logic in this proposition: The more cohesive the group, the greater the members' satisfaction with it and the greater their willingness to remain part of it, hence the greater their incentives to think and act as the group does. Yet, this final step is taken too hastily. Whether a group member feels compelled to go along with the group, depends entirely upon the *content* of the group's norms. Group norms may very well encourage critical discussion and dissent by minorities or individual members. It should be added that this is not very often the case. Usually group norms tend to stress the

importance of consensus and joint action, hence the tendency toward uniformity. The key point to remember, however, is that cohesiveness increases the power of group norms, and these may or may not favor uniformity.

In practice, the tendency for conformity in cohesive groups is widespread. Research by Festinger *et al.* and many of their students has illustrated this in both laboratory and field settings (Asch, 1952; Hare, 1976; McGrath, 1984). The very cohesiveness of the group promotes this: Because group members emphatically want to remain in the group as respected participants, the group enjoys considerable sanctioning power. It has at its disposal a wide range of techniques for changing the opinions and behaviors of a deviant member: from occasional remarks or jokes that alert the deviant to the group norm, to (threats of) rejection and expulsion. The group member who is able to withstand such pressure has to be a formidable individual. Yet, as the literature on deviance and psychological reactance has shown, under certain conditions, deviants may persist and serve as catalysts for group changes (Schachter, 1951; see overviews in Diener, 1980 and Dickenberger and Gniech, 1982).

### *Cohesiveness and Group Problem Solving*

At a very general level, field studies have shown that cohesive groups are more effective in accomplishing group goals than non-cohesive groups. Similarly, studies of group problem-solving show that cohesive groups perform well (Shaw and Shaw, 1962; Maier, 1970). In the literature contrasting individual and group performance, the benefits of group cohesion have been stressed again and again. The advantages of groups are said to lie mainly in the sphere of the quantity and quality of information storage and retrieval. Also, groups are more successful than individuals in generating a wide range of alternatives. At the same time, group decision-making has some costs: It takes more time and it requires a sometimes difficult give-and-take between group members. In this context, the value of cohesiveness is stressed as promoting a congenial and task-oriented atmosphere, which allegedly facilitates group discussion (see, for instance, Miesing and Preble, 1985).

These are all familiar arguments. And it was precisely this line of thinking that Janis was contending with. He surmised that, at a certain point, high cohesion becomes detrimental to the quality of decision-making. This idea was most impressive in its counterintuitive power: the realization that, depending upon the content of group norms, harmonious, cooperative, teamlike entities may be a liability rather than an asset in producing high-quality decisions.

This is not what one would expect. At face value, it seems perfectly sensible that a tightly knit group, where members like each other and cooperate smoothly, is likely to produce better decisions at lower costs than groups where members

cooperate less, groups where there is little common ground between members, and groups characterized by internal conflicts. The basic thesis of groupthink is, of course, exactly the reverse: The very cohesiveness of the group may become a value in itself for each of the members, and to such an extent that they may be reluctant to say or do anything that might disturb it, such as voicing criticisms against the ideas and opinions of other members or the group's majority. Furthermore, it may even affect (delimit) their capacity to think critically.

This lack of frankness is detrimental to the making of consequential decisions, where discussion and a certain amount of dissent are indispensable in arriving at well-grounded choices.

The characteristics of groupthink are, in fact, geared to the preservation of group cohesion and high spirits through the quick attainment and preservation of consensus on the issue the group confronts. Ultimately, this can produce unsound decisions leading to the kind of policy fiascoes analyzed by Janis.

However, in the experimental literature on group decision-making and task performance, little support for this contention could be found, Janis's case rested more on the above-discussed findings on pressures toward uniformity and on his studies of combat units (to be described below). At the same time, studies of U.S. foreign policy decision-making provide mostly anecdotal support for Janis's ideas. For example, in his detailed analysis of the decision-making process of President Truman and his advisors at the time of the Korean invasion, De Rivera signals that, at times, the high cohesion of Truman's group (despite bitter personal rivalries between key advisors) seemed to cause distortions of the advisement process: the withholding of information that might shatter the consensus of the group (De Rivera, 1968). After the publication of Janis's study, many other analysts signalled such distortions of information processing and choice-making beyond the domain of foreign policy (for example, George, 1974; Gero, 1984; Hirokawa *et al.*, 1988; Hirokawa and Scheerhorn, 1986; Tjosvold, 1984; Smart and Vertinsky, 1977).

### **Intellectual Backgrounds: Coping with Stress**

In crisis circumstances (high stress), group cohesiveness generally increases: Task groups may actually become "primary groups" under the pressure of outside events. This thesis has been extensively documented in field settings. The most striking examples of primary group ties can be found in military groups in combat situations. Loyalty to the small combat unit was what kept many soldiers going during World War Two (in terms of combat effectiveness and resistance to enemy propaganda), both in the German and the U.S. armies. Similar findings were obtained in other theatres of war (Chodoff, 1983; George, 1968; Grinker and Spiegel, 1945; Shils and Janowitz, 1948; Stouffer *et al.*,

1949). Other field studies can be found in the disaster literature, for instance in Lucas' study of two groups of miners trapped underground for many days following a major accident (Lucas, 1970). A third example concerns Mulder *et al.*'s research among Dutch associations of shopkeepers threatened by supermarket take-overs (Mulder and Stemerding, 1963; also Mulder *et al.*, 1971).

Janis—as co-researcher in the American Soldier Project—obtained in this period most of his initial data and insights on group cohesion under stress (Janis, 1945; Janis 1949a–c). Throughout his career, he remained interested in the problem of human responses to stress, in particular the ways in which people make decisions under conditions of external threat. This interest has taken him from work on the effects of air war (Janis, 1951) and disaster warnings (1962), to the plight of patients deciding whether to undergo surgery (1958, 1971), and onwards to Lewinean areas like dieting and decisions to stop smoking (Janis and Mann, 1977; Wheeler and Janis, 1980). From these wide-ranging fields of empirical study, he developed a comprehensive theory about individual and collective modes of choice under stress (Janis, 1971; Janis and Mann, 1977; Janis, 1989). Focusing on small-group performance under stress, Janis was heavily influenced by psychodynamic theory, stressing the role of individual and collective defense mechanisms in coping with anxiety. Among these was the illusion of invulnerability:

A variety of less overt personal defenses against anxiety is likely to develop. Complete denial of the impending danger, implicit trust in the protectiveness of the authorities, reversion to an infantile belief in personal omnipotence—these and other unconscious or partially conscious defense mechanisms have been described as typical modes of adjustment during a period of impending air attack. Irrespective of the particular modes of defense a person employs, however, the net effect may be an illusion of personal invulnerability. (Janis, 1971)

In his early work on coping with stress, the roots of Janis's counterconventional view of the effects of high cohesion on group performance can be found. This basically psychoanalytic view suggests that, even if a group fails to achieve its formal goals or stated official objectives, its cohesiveness may remain unchecked. It may, indeed, even grow, as the members view one another and the group as a whole as a source of emotional consolation, quite independently from task- and goal-related considerations. Lott and Lott have signalled that when failures are perceived by the group members to be arbitrarily “imposed” by sources outside the group's control, there is a good chance that attraction to the group increases (Lott and Lott, 1965; see also Mulder and Stemerding, 1965; Rabbie and Wilkens, 1971). This is even more so when group members lack an exit option: They cannot dissociate themselves, so they decide to make the most of it ('t Hart, 1990).

However, laboratory research has made it clear that there is no simple and clear-cut linkage between external stress and increased group cohesiveness.

Hamblin hypothesized that group integration actually decreases when members either feel that they can do better by a timely retreat from the group, or perceive that there is no solution to the crisis available at all. In these situations, group members may display more self-oriented behavior and indulge in imposing negative sanctions upon their colleagues (Hamblin, 1958, 1960). In his research on stress in task groups, Payne emphasized that for groups under stress to become more integrated, it is necessary that the members have interpersonal skills (Payne, 1981).

In conclusion, one could argue that although qualifications are needed, the groupthink concept effectively turns around some of the traditional ideas about the effects of “cohesiveness” on group performance. To a great extent, Janis’s contribution lies in developing and pursuing a counterintuitive line of thinking. Moreover, he has applied it to historic cases of political decision-making. Let us now turn to the main thrust of his analysis.

## JANIS ON GROUPTHINK

What is groupthink? How does it come about? What are its specific antecedents and effects?

The most systematic treatment of these issues can be found in the second edition of Janis’s book, which extends and above all systematizes the earlier formulation [Janis, (1982a); see also the early re-working in Janis and Mann (1977), and the more applied interpretations in Janis (1982b, 1986)]. In his recent study *Crucial Decisions*, he has presented the groupthink phenomenon within a broader context of decision heuristics and shortcuts to rationality, while at the same time responding to some of the critical comments raised in response to the two editions of the groupthink study, however, without changing the theory as such (Janis, 1989).

### Definition

Originally, Janis defined groupthink as follows: “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” (1982a, p.9). As Longley and Pruitt have pointed out, this definition is confusing as it incorporates not only the process itself (a certain mode of collective thinking), but also some of its antecedents (a cohesive in-group, personal involvement in it by individual members), as well as some of its effects (a reduced capacity to realistically appraise alternative courses

of action). In his later formulations, Janis has not, as Longley and Pruitt imply, changed his definition (Longley and Pruitt, 1980). Rather he has provided an operational formulation of it; the causal connections between antecedents, indicators and effects are made explicit in a flow chart (see Fig. 1).

Thus, it turns out that groupthink stands for concurrence-seeking, that is, the tendency for group members toward converging opinions about the adoption of a certain course of action in a given decision situation.

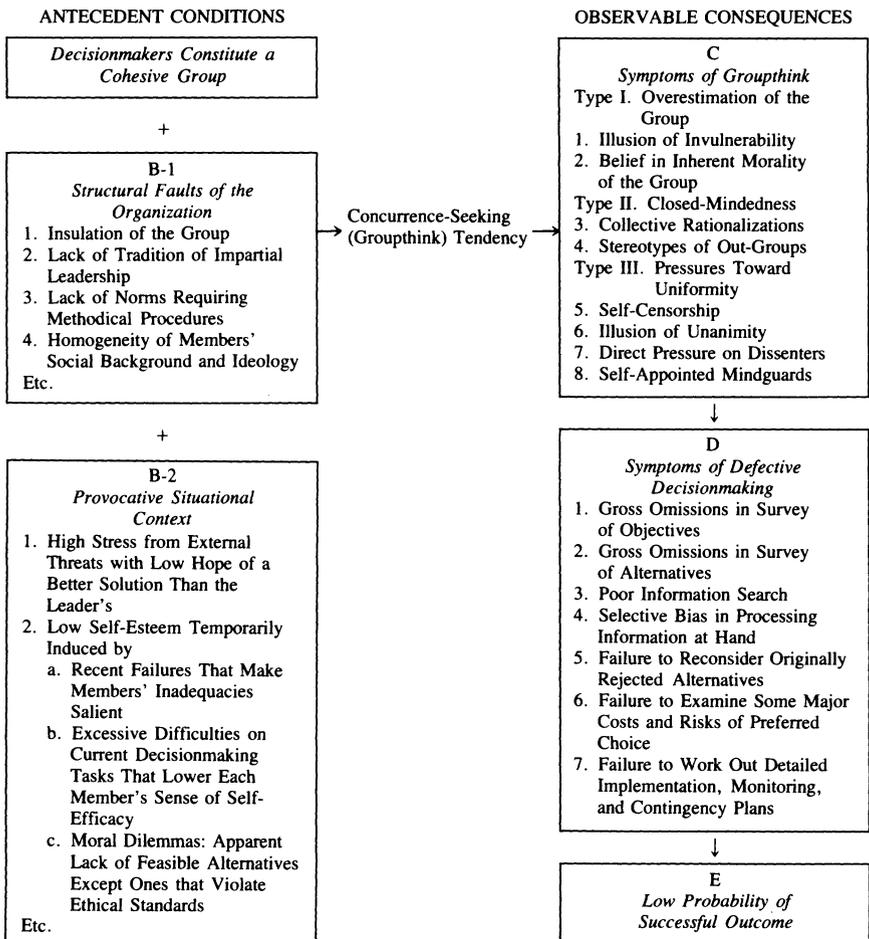


Fig. 1 Groupthink theory: A model. Source: Janis, J. L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

## Antecedent Conditions

Consider the flow chart. It shows three types of “causes”:

1. High cohesiveness of the decision-making group. Take President Truman’s group which dealt with the conduct of the Korean war. Janis quotes Glen Paige:

Truman’s group of advisors developed a high degree of solidarity. Glen Paige . . . calls attention to the “intra-group solidarity” at all the crisis meetings. He concludes that “one of the most striking aspects . . . is the high degree of satisfaction and sense of moral rightness shared by the decision makers” . . . The members of the group continued to display esprit de corps and mutual admiration throughout the many months they worked together. It was a group of men who shared the same basic values and dominant beliefs of the power elite of American society, particularly about the necessity for containing the expansion of “world communism” in order to protect the “free world.” (1982a, p.49; see also De Rivera, 1968)

2. Specific structural characteristics (“faults”) of the organizational context in which the group operates. One of the structural aspects mentioned by Janis is a lack of impartial leadership. Consider the following passage on the way President Kennedy presided over the meetings of the Cuban-invasion planning group during the Bay of Pigs episode:

[At] each meeting, instead of opening up the agenda to permit a full airing of the opposing considerations, he allowed the CIA representatives to dominate the entire discussion. The president permitted them to refute immediately each tentative doubt that one of the others might express, instead of asking whether anyone else had the same doubt or wanted to pursue the implications of the new worrisome issue that had been raised. (1982a, p.42)

3. Stressful internal and external characteristics of the situation. Groupthink does not easily occur in routine situations involving equivocal decisions. Rather, the chances of groupthink markedly increase when decision-makers are under stress, dealing with a crisis situation. In these circumstances, decision-makers may perceive threats to their self-esteem because of the tremendous burden of having to decide about impenetrable, morally complex issues. Then, the group may become a key source of consolation. See Janis’s remarks on the Watergate cover-up by Nixon and his associates:

[During] this stressful period they spent much more time talking about what to do, but their rambling conversations invariably ended up reaffirming and extending the cover-up policy. These long conversations could be characterized as displaying collective uncritical thinking. . . . Apparently under conditions of high stress the members had become highly dependent on the group for social support, to maintain their morale as well as to protect them from criminal liability through their affiliation with the presidency. (1982a, pp.252–253)

These are not equally important for the occurrence of groupthink, according to Janis: “The explanatory hypothesis about why groupthink occurs gives preeminence to the provocative situational factors . . . (box B-2)” (1982a, p.259). And then: “[the] explanatory hypothesis implicitly assigns a secondary role to the

structural faults of the organization (box B-1). . . Those structural features can be regarded as moderating variables involving the presence or absence of organizational constraints that could counteract the concurrence-seeking tendency” (Janis, 1982a, p.301).

### Characteristics

Janis mentions three types of characteristics of groupthink:

1. Those producing an overestimation of the group (illusion of invulnerability; belief in inherent morality).
2. Those producing closed-mindedness (collective rationalizations; stereotyped images of out-groups).
3. Those producing pressures toward uniformity (self-censorship; illusion of unanimity; direct pressures on dissenters; self-appointed mindguards).

From these characteristics, one cannot doubt the negative evaluation of groupthink that pervades Janis’s writings on the subject. All characteristics seem malicious: while the pressures toward uniformity can be viewed as indicator of excessive concurrence-seeking as such, the other two types of characteristics (overestimation, closed-mindedness) assure that this concurrence-seeking takes place in the context of “bad” policies.

According to Janis, concurrence-seeking as such is a necessary element within each collective decision process (especially when unanimity is called for). At a certain point in the deliberative process, discussions need to be concluded and actions taken. In this respect, there is not so much difference from processes of individual decision-making, where decision-makers start “bolstering” their preferred alternatives (Soelberg, 1967; Janis and Mann, 1977). However, concurrence-seeking becomes *excessive* when it takes place too early and in too restrictive a way. This need still not be fatal, if the group is embarking on, more or less accidentally, a sound alternative. It is the other set of characteristics of groupthink that are likely to prevent this from happening: Closed-minded, stereotyped, overconfident and morally exempt decision-makers are highly unlikely to strike the right, or at least a satisfactory, key.

### GROUPTHINK AS A FIELD OF RESEARCH

I have already noted the paradox between the instant popularity of groupthink and the relative numerical paucity of subsequent research efforts. It is time to illustrate this. At the one end, there is the mass of textbooks either reprinting Janis’s work or paraphrasing it, couched in stern and definite warnings about the dangers of “too much cohesiveness” (for instance, Forsyth, 1983;

DuBrin, 1983; Swap 1984; Luttrin and Settle, 1985; Roberts, 1988). But what actual research work has been done since 1972? What are its results? Apart from Janis's own follow-up writings on the subject, some critical reviews have appeared, three studies discussing problems of conceptualization and theory formation, as well as a number of laboratory and "real world" replications of Janis's empirical research.

### Real-World Replications

Only a few analysts have produced articles or monographs applying, like Janis, groupthink analysis to government and public policy-making. In 1974, the Watergate scandal dominated the American political and scholarly community. Several analysts have tried to interpret this domestic-policy fiasco by suggesting that groupthink was operating within the group of President Nixon and his advisors. Green and Connolly have directly linked groupthink to the Watergate cover-up (Green and Connolly, 1974). Raven has made a very detailed effort to use groupthink in explaining the Watergate cover-up (Raven, 1974; see also Raven and Rubin 1975). He found many conditions and symptoms present, but he also concluded that some very crucial conditions, such as high group cohesiveness, were lacking. Nixon's "big team" and his "young team" were analyzed using sociometric techniques. It appeared that there were highly competitive and conflict-laden relationships within the Nixon group, which made groupthink quite unlikely. "On the other hand," Raven notes,

the Nixon group could still be considered a highly cohesive group in some sense—despite their personal antagonisms, all of them wanted with all their hearts and souls to be in that group and to be central to that group. . . . Dependence upon and admiration for their leader was the glue which held the Nixon group together. (Raven, 1974, p.311)

Raven, not entirely satisfied with the groupthink hypothesis as an explanation of what happened, also suggests other theoretical perspectives from group dynamics that may be useful in this respect (Raven, 1974, pp. 313–318). Wong-McCarthy has presented the results of a detailed content analysis of the White House tape transcripts, which also points to many symptoms of groupthink (Wong-McCarthy, 1976). In the second edition of his book, Janis also examines the Watergate affair, and reintroduces the groupthink explanation by focusing on a much smaller in-group: Nixon, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and (until his "defection") Dean.

Tetlock has made content analyses of speeches by decision-makers associated with groupthink and non-groupthink decisions, as they were outlined in Janis's book. Using a technique called integrative complexity coding, he found that

relative to nongroupthink, decision makers were more simplistic in their perceptions of policy issues and made more positive references to the United States and its allies (own group). Inconsistent with Janis' theory, groupthink decision makers did not make significant more negative references to Communist States and their allies (opponents). (Tetlock, 1979, p.1314; see also Suedfield and Tetlock, 1977)

In assessing the contributions of this specific technique, Tetlock stretches its heuristic value: detecting probable cases for groupthink analysis. His method has not since been pursued in groupthink analysis.

Gero used a questionnaire to examine further the effects of a consensus style of group decision-making on expectations of intra-group conflict among group members. She found that there may be a strong inclination toward amiability and agreement in consensus climates. The potentially adverse effects on decision quality are discussed (Gero, 1985).

Finally, attempts have been made to add more cases to the groupthink catalogue. Following a magazine article by Janis, Smith has attempted to document the suggestion that groupthink dominated the Carter decision-making process with respect to the hostage rescue mission to Iran. Heller, in an article in the *Guardian*, linked groupthink to the conduct of the Falkland Islands war by the Thatcher cabinet (Janis, 1980; Smith, 1984; and Gabriel, 1985; Heller, 1983). These latter examples cannot always be considered successful. They are all very casual and lacking in psychological proficiency to make them serious contributions. On the contrary, such quick-and-easy characterizations may create an illusion that groupthink is an all-purpose, little-effort label explaining just about any case of policy failure. This is deplorable, and Janis has gone to great lengths in calling for caution in linking groupthink to policy outcomes, as well as in providing a sound framework of all relevant factors to be actually used in groupthink analysis.

A more substantive effort was undertaken by Rosenthal. In a comprehensive analysis of several cases of crisis decision-making in the Netherlands (disasters, riots, terrorism), he systematically checked the evidence of groupthink. In some cases, positive indications were found, in others not (Rosenthal, 1984). Similarly inconclusive or even negative about the role of groupthink were both Etheredge and Polsby in their studies of the evolution of the United States Central American policy and several cases of policy innovation, respectively (Polsby, 1984; Etheredge, 1985). Hensley and Griffin performed a full-fledged groupthink analysis on the case of a protracted conflict about the location of additional sports facilities at the campus of Kent State University. The authors found clear-cut evidence for the presence of groupthink in the university's board of trustees. In the course of the article, some useful methodological and theoretical observations were made [Hensley and Griffin (1986), in particular, pp.501, 502]. Some follow-up studies have provided criticism of Janis's interpretations of the case studies

presented in his book. For example, Barrett has re-examined the U.S. decision process concerning the escalation of the Vietnam War and has argued that, contrary to Janis's findings, groupthink did not play a role at all (Barrett, 1988; see Janis's response in Janis, 1989). Similarly, Etheredge (1985) was skeptical about the groupthink analysis of the Bay of Pigs decisions by President Kennedy and his advisors (also met by a rejoinder from Janis in his 1989 book; these discussions, as well as Janis *et al.*'s polemic with Welch about their interpretation of the Cuban missile crisis illustrates my earlier point that Janis's theory-driven case studies are likely to be vulnerable to in-depth scrutiny by historians).

### *Using Cases to Adapt the Theory*

McCauley used the original case studies by Janis to substantiate his theoretical claim that groupthink comes about not only through "amiability-induced" internalization of group norms and opinions, but also through mere compliance (public agreement on the part of individual group members not accompanied by private acceptance of the prevailing perspective). McCauley's analysis rightly calls attention to the status and power dimensions of group decision-making (McCauley, 1990).

In my dissertation, I have further elaborated on this line of thinking, arguing that, on the basis of findings on changing patterns of hierarchy and leadership in small groups under stress, "anticipatory compliance" of group members to senior members or leader figures constitutes an alternative path towards groupthink (e.g., excessive concurrence-seeking). In other words, strong affective ties between group members are *not* a necessary variable in producing groupthink. Given a basic amount of group cohesion seen as interdependence between members, groupthink may also arise because low-status members anticipate thoughts, wishes or commands from leader figures, and adapt their own thinking and action accordingly ('t Hart, 1990).

Similarly, Whyte has made an attempt at comparing the groupthink construct with related approaches of high-risk group decision-making based on framing and prospect theory, and examines the relative merits of these alternative approaches in explaining empirical cases of decisional fiascoes, mentioning the Challenger disaster and the Iran-Contra scandal as potential cases (Whyte, 1989).

### *Additional Case Work*

The Challenger case was subject to a more quantitatively oriented test of Janis's groupthink model performed by Esser and Lindoerfer, who found clear signs of positive antecedents to groupthink in the critical decisions concerning the launch of the shuttle (Esser and Lindoerfer, 1989). In testing my own revised

model of groupthink, I found strong indications of groupthink in a study of U.S. decision-making with regard to the arms-for-hostages deals with Iran in 1985–1986, while these were conspicuously absent in what could be called the Dutch equivalent to Pearl Harbor (e.g., the prelude to the German invasion of the Netherlands of May 1940) ('t Hart, 1990).

### Laboratory Replications

In addition to the case approach, interesting attempts have been made to investigate whether groupthink (unconventional to many experimental psychologists because of its real-world empirical basis), can also be observed in decision groups working under laboratory conditions.

Flowers conducted an experiment with problem-solving groups in which he systematically varied leadership style (closed; open) and group cohesiveness (high; low). He hypothesized that decision processes of the high cohesiveness/closed leadership variant would most likely be characterized by groupthink. Using a somewhat debatable research design, his findings stress the importance of the leadership variable, while no evidence could be obtained with respect to cohesiveness, implicitly supporting the view that there is an alternative pathway to groupthink independent from group cohesiveness, stressing the role of compliance instead (Flowers, 1977).

A more sophisticated design was presented by Courtright. He also focused upon group cohesiveness and (non-)directive leadership, but he devised much more credible experimental procedures to attain them. Also, he put forward a convincing measure of the dependent variable, that is, the quality of decision-making. His major findings suggest

(a) the feasibility of the groupthink phenomenon as such (in particular types of decision groups);

(b) that the absence of disagreement in directive leader/high cohesiveness groups is one of the major factors contributing to the—alleged—low quality of decision-making in these groups. As such, Courtright seems to have come across a plausible operational measure of concurrence-seeking [Courtright (1976), a comparable design and similar results were later reported by Callaway *et al.*, (1985)].

Further, Fodor and Smith also studied the leadership and cohesiveness variables in an experimental group problem-solving design. They, however, did not manipulate the style of leadership by instructions. Rather, they sought out group leaders high and respectively low in n-Power, that is, in power motive action. Strikingly, the low n-Power leaders presided over the groups that produced better decisions than those headed by high n-Power leaders. Like Flowers, Fodor and Smith could also not find significant effects of group cohesiveness. Again, as in

the Flowers study, this lack of results may be due to the rather simplistic experimental manipulation of the cohesiveness variable, yet it may also point toward the abovementioned multipath explanation of groupthink [Fodor and Smith (1985); similar results were reported by Leana (1985)].

Moorhead has developed a clear model of what would be needed to adequately test for groupthink in decision-making groups (Moorhead, 1982). His attempts to use the model in an empirical analysis of teams of management students engaged in a 3-month intergroup competition provided material for additional doubts concerning the overarching (negative) impact of high group cohesiveness (Moorhead and Montaneri, 1986).

t' Hart *et al.* (1989) have developed a decision-simulation design testing the effects of different modes of accountability for decisions among group members upon the quality of decision-making. The decisional context was designed to incorporate many of the theoretical antecedents to groupthink. It was found that decision-making groups that do not have to account for their judgments and choices displayed more tendencies toward groupthink-like patterns of group decision-making than groups whose members, either collectively or individually, did have to render account.

### *Groupthink and Choice Shift*

As Whyte (1989) has rightly noted, Janis does not elaborately discuss a long-standing research tradition within group dynamics, namely research on group polarization and choice shifts. Although Janis hypothesizes that the group process induces group members to adopt courses of action that seem to involve high risks of failure, he has not developed his argument with sufficient reference to the results of experimental and field studies and criticisms of the "risky shift" (i.e., group interaction favors more risky solutions than individual members would have adopted without group discussion), the cautious shift (the reverse phenomenon) and other work on group polarization (Moscovici, 1976; Lamm and Meyers, 1978; Meertens, 1980). This gap has partially been filled by follow-up research.

Minix has used groupthink to explain choice shifts in the context of crisis decision-making (Minix, 1982). The key question was whether decision groups, confronted with various feasible scenarios of international crisis events, would reach different (more or less risky decisions) than individuals. To enhance external relevance, Minix's subjects included military officers, the closest he could come to running the experiment with officials who actually make these decisions in real-life situations (other groups were cadets and university students). In his theoretical discussion, Minix discussed at length the crisis literature in order to illustrate the validity of a small-group approach to the analysis of crisis decision-

making. He stressed that maintaining decision quality under stress was a vital problem in crisis decision-making. Further, he elaborated upon groupthink as a syndrome that was not only likely to appear in crisis decision-making by small groups, but also detrimental to the quality of decision making. In this respect, *excessive risk-taking* was regarded as a pivotal factor.

In the analysis of his results—which showed a rather differentiated pattern of risk propensities in his three populations—Minix hinted at elements from the antecedents and symptoms of groupthink being operative in the dynamics of choice shifts. These included, first and foremost, the operation and differentiated content of group norms and standards among the three populations, but also phenomena such as collective psychological rigidity, defective information processing (for instance, uncritical reliance upon historical analogies), and the steering role of group leaders. The selection of subjects—college students, naval cadets, and navy officers—reflects Minix's emphasis on the importance of normative orientations as an explanatory factor. Minix's work indicates that there may be connections between groupthink and risk-taking in crisis situations. In that respect, his work can be viewed as lending support to earlier assertions by De Rivera, who examined the risk-taking process in the Korean decision—an episode which Janis later explained as a groupthink decision (De Rivera, 1968).

Why, then, do groupthink groups tend to play down uncertainties and neglect the risk dimension of their preferred policies? The fact that they do so should be quite clear from some of the symptoms of groupthink. The overestimation of the group through the illusion of invulnerability and the belief in the inherent morality of the group sets the stage for overoptimism. It is reinforced by closed-mindedness (rationalizations and stereotypes), while cautionary forces within the group are prevented from gaining leverage by the the operation of uniformity pressures.

Whyte (1989) has argued that excessive risk-taking in the group decisions leading to policy fiascoes is due to group polarization effects occurring when group members perceive the choice situation as being one of choosing between a sure loss and an alternative which entails the possibility of a greater loss. These perceptions may be the result of biased decision "frames" adopted by the members of the group. The effect of group interaction will be to amplify the dominant individual preference for risk that characterizes individual group members confronted with these perceived "no-win" situations. This thesis remains to be explored by systematic empirical research.

On the basis of a more elaborate review of the polarization literature, I have argued for another interpretation ('t Hart, 1990). In my view, there exists a paradoxical relationship between groupthink and risk-taking: It is precisely *because* the risk dimension of their actions becomes less relevant to members of decision groups caught up in the groupthink syndrome, that they will not refrain from supporting alternatives that are highly risky. In reconsidering the psycho-

logical processes underlying groupthink, there are some remarkable resemblances with other group research. For instance, the characteristics and consequences of deindividuation contain forces which provoke a negligence of risks. For deindividuated groups, the future as such loses relevance. They become less concerned about the longer-term consequences of their actions; they are insensitive to the thought that they are taking any "risks" at all.

While this may seem an extreme form of risk negligence, there are striking correspondences between this psychological syndrome and the complacent groups of Admiral Kimmel and President Nixon examined by Janis. In both the Pearl Harbor and Watergate cases, there were marked instances where the groups failed to take into consideration future consequences and risks of what they were advocating. Likewise, groups acting under great stress such as Truman's Korean group and, at times, Johnson's Vietnam Tuesday Luncheon group seemed to suffer from a collapsed time-perspective, a cognitive pattern that is frequently found as a (defensive) response to overload and stress (Holsti, 1979; Holsti and George, 1975). With only the very short-term consequences of decisions deemed relevant, the concept of risk faded into the background. Consequently, reckless decisions were taken.

Second, excessive risk-taking can occur in what have been termed *groupthink-type 2* situations ('t Hart, 1990): groups not acting under crisis-induced stress, but rather driven by perceptions of opportunity. The desire to maximize success by determined action in an opportunity situation (cf. political and bureaucratic entrepreneurship) can easily lead to adventurism and collective overconfidence. Support for this latter contention has been found in my examination of the Poindexter-McFarlane-North nucleus directing the arms-for-hostages exchanges with Iran ('t Hart, 1990, pp. 305-309).

### **Additional Research Required**

In reviewing the various findings of replication studies, it should be remarked that their number is modest, their quality mixed and their findings only partially conclusive (see, however, Janis, 1989). Real-world replications often lack in analytical rigor, while laboratory replications are plagued by the seeming impossibility of incorporating more than only a very limited number of variables in their designs. In particular, experimental studies of groupthink have rarely succeeded in creating the kind of decisional stress that is a crucial element of the preconditions for groupthink outlined in the Janis model. All in all, this examination of empirical replications leads one to sympathize with Rosenthal's assessment that "[it] has proved to be extremely difficult to produce indisputable information about groupthink" [Rosenthal (1986, p.120); see the excellent re-

view of methodological aspects of groupthink research by Won-Woo Park, 1991)].

## THE GREAT DEBATE: GROUPTHINK AND DECISION QUALITY

As can be observed from the presentation of follow-up studies, the empirical validity of groupthink is a matter to be settled by further research using a variety of methods, ultimately producing a more specified, contingent perspective on the occurrence of groupthink, i.e., a better demarcation of the contextual factors conducive to groupthink.

Much more difficult to resolve are issues concerning the effects of groupthink on decision outputs, and hence the evaluation of groupthink as a mode of policy-making. Does groupthink indeed produce bad decisions all of the time? Why should this be the case? And to what extent can the decisional outputs of groupthink be characterized in more theoretical terms?

### *Theoretical Considerations*

The quality of high-level policy-making is a key issue not only with regard to government action but also in major corporations, whose decisions equally affect large segments of society. Decision-makers need to anticipate and circumvent the complexities of decision-making in the multi-actor, multi-interest environment that characterizes most issues that require top-level consideration. Government authorities need to deal with cognitive and value complexities. While these topics are central to the normative theories of political decision-making developed in the organizational and political paradigms mentioned in section 2, few of the psychological contributions deal with this topic in an elaborate way.

Groupthink theory is a marked exception. In fact, groupthink has explicitly been developed as a theory of explaining decisional failures and policy fiascoes. It is not surprising, therefore, that Longley and Pruitt note that "a negative evaluation of groupthink pervades all of Janis' writings about the topic" (Longley and Pruitt, 1980, p.77). They signal that even in the revised conception of groupthink as concurrence-seeking, the flow chart directly links concurrence-seeking and groupthink characteristics to symptoms of defective decision-making, which are presented as a recipe for policy failure.

However, in his 1982 edition, Janis is not entirely as deterministic about the alleged adverse effects of groupthink as Longley and Pruitt suspect. In the final analysis, according to Janis, groupthink is not a necessary, nor a sufficient

condition for policy failure (Janis, 1982a, pp. 11, 196–197, 259). He does suggest that groupthink increases the likelihood of defective decision processes, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of disastrous policy outcomes. Still it is quite clear that, in Janis's mind, groupthink is a certain road to failure. In fact, in his research strategy, he departed from this premise: He chose cases of (alleged) policy failure first, and then applied groupthink analysis to see whether the decision process was affected by it. If so, groupthink was implied to be one of the causes of failure. This methodology places a high premium on the objectivity of the analyst to withstand (unconscious) biases towards selective interpretation of the case study material. Also, this reconstructive-analytical *and* evaluative approach is open to accusations of producing circular statements: Groupthink is inferred from policy failure and failure is explained in terms of groupthink.<sup>3</sup>

The link between concurrence-seeking and defective decision-making is evident from the specification of the eight symptoms of groupthink: From a procedural point of view, they appear to be all bad (see boxes C and D in flow chart). However, to understand the implied link between defective decision processes and decisional failures, one must first take a look at Janis's broader views on the issue of decision quality, as formulated in his classic study of decision-making, written with Leon Mann (Janis and Mann, 1977).

Janis adheres to the paradigm prevalent in decision theory that "good" (i.e., systematic, vigilant) procedures produce "good" results (goal maximization). In his view, decision quality is contingent upon the quality of the deliberations preceding the actual choice. Good procedures virtually ensure good results (defined as optimal outcomes with the limits of the situation). Therefore, the authors have adopted a model of decision quality that is entirely procedural. It comprises seven "critical tasks" for high-quality decision making:

- (a) canvassing a wide range of available courses of action;
- (b) surveying the full range of objectives to be fulfilled and the values implicated by the choice;
- (c) careful weighing of risks, costs, and benefits of each alternative;
- (d) intensive search for new information relevant to further evaluation of each alternative;
- (e) assimilating and seriously considering new information or expert judgment, even if it is critical of the initially preferred course of action;
- (f) re-examining positive and negative consequences of all known alternatives before final choice;
- (g) making detailed provisions for implementation of chosen option, making contingency plans to be used if various known risks were to materialize. The symptoms of groupthink, the authors hold, are squarely opposed to an adequate fulfilment of these tasks. Hence, defective deliberations about decisions, and

<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to one of the journal's anonymous referees for drawing my attention to this point.

hence (logically deduced from the authors' premises), the near-certainty of failing policy outcomes. This line of reasoning is not entirely unproblematic.

### *Symptoms of Groupthink Reassessed?*

Longley and Pruitt contend the linkage between the symptoms of groupthink (box C) and defective decision-making (box D) is one-sided. They contend that "symptoms of groupthink as self-censorship, urging dissenters to curtail their remarks, avoiding the influx of outside opinions, and even collective rationalizations are eventually necessary in many decision making sequences" (Longley and Pruitt, 1980, p.77). In other words, they maintain that these features can also be detected in decision-making processes that would qualify as high quality. Mechanisms for consensus-building are necessary to come to a decision at all. If no limits were to be put upon the duration, scope, and likely outcomes of their deliberations, decision groups would never come around to anything. According to Longley and Pruitt, the crucial factors involved in determining whether the above characteristics of groupthink really obstruct a sound process of deliberation about choice are:

(a) their timing. If one curtails discussion too early one falls into the trap envisaged by Janis; but if one, for instance, uses these mechanisms to short-circuit repetitive and low-utility discussions, they might actually enhance the quality of deliberation;

(b) the type of decision task that the group faces. Longley and Pruitt cite Katz and Kahn (1978), who differentiate between dilemma-like issues requiring innovative solutions—which, in turn, demand very elaborate and wide-ranging discussions with a minimum of closure and focusing during the key deliberations on the one hand—and normal problems that are less complex and can be solved more easily, thus, not necessitating too elaborate discussion.

It follows that the above-mentioned groupthink symptoms will probably hurt the quality of decision-making about "dilemmas," while they may be neutral or even functional in "regular problem solving." It is interesting to see that in his recent book, Janis (1989) has paid ample attention to *specifying the conditions* under which his newly developed "constraints" model of decision-making is applicable. Specifically, he asserts that the problematic nature of distorted decision procedures is most clearly felt when decision makers are faced with important decisions, necessitating consequential choices—as opposed to more simple routine choices. The heuristics, biases, and other cognitive and motivational barriers to strictly rational-synoptic or, in Janis's more realistic terms, "vigilant" decision-making, are problematic only when decision-makers are faced with difficult problems for which there are no standard solutions. This suggests that, as far as groupthink is concerned, it is not really interesting to perform groupthink analyses of regular problem-solving groups at some lower-

level of management or policy-making. Instead, and compatible to Longley and Pruitt's assertion, one should concentrate on high-level decision groups at the pinnacle of the organization or government where the stakes are high, standard solutions are lacking, and "bad" procedures for deliberation and choice are likely to be self-defeating.

### *Effects of Groupthink Re-assessed?*

As far as this linkage between procedures and failing outcomes is concerned, it could be suggested on theoretical grounds that the linkage between the symptoms of defective decision-making as produced by groupthink and the incidence of policy failure is truly one of probability, and not of necessity. In other words, "bad" procedures need not always produce bad results; decision-makers may get lucky. Similarly, well-conceived decisions may result in fiascoes, because of failing implementation, unforeseen adversities, and so on. The pervasiveness of uncertainties has led Dror (1986) to characterize policy-making as a process of "fuzzy gambling." Janis is obviously aware of this need for qualification. However, in groupthink analysis, the *de facto* line of reasoning has been that groupthink produces defective decision-making procedures which, in turn, produce policy fiascoes.

Recently, Herek *et al.* (1987) have presented some empirical evidence suggesting that the implied direct connection between processes and outcomes of decision-making is indeed highly relevant. They examined 19 cases of U.S. presidential decision-making during international crises, using a selection of high-quality academic studies. Subsequently, they rated the quality of the decision-making process using operational definitions of the seven procedural criteria mentioned above. Then, they had two experts (from opposite ends of the conservative-liberal continuum in their personal views of the cold war—in order to control for ideology effects) make ratings of the outcomes of each of the crises—using two criteria: advancement of U.S. national interests and reduction of international tensions in the post-crisis period. This design enabled them to investigate their hypothesis that high-quality decision-making procedures during crises are associated with better crisis outcomes than are defective decision-making procedures.

There proved to be "sizable" correlations between process and outcome scores. Higher scores on symptoms of defective decision-making were related both to more unfavorable immediate outcomes for U.S. vital interests and to more unfavorable immediate outcomes for international conflict. Correlations do not allow statements about causality. Therefore, several alternative, third-factor and methodological explanations were probed—and discounted. In the end, the authors conclude that

The findings of the present study thus bear out the surmises of those social scientists who have concluded that poor-quality procedures used in arriving at a decision give rise to avoidable errors that increase the likelihood of obtaining an unsatisfactory outcome. (Herek, Janis & Huth, 1987)

While this piece of research does not explicitly deal with the effects of groupthink on policy outcomes, the gist of its argument is quite pertinent in this respect. The assertions by organizationally and politically oriented analysts appear to be incorrect: Decision process does matter in determining policy outcomes; groupthink, therefore, is a real danger to effective decision-making.

One might object to this conclusion by criticizing the highly imaginative, yet in many respects debatable, research design. Take the operationalization of outcome quality. What are vital U.S. interests in any given crisis? Is it not conventional wisdom that national interests are, at best, an ambiguous measuring rod for success and failure of policies—for instance, if one takes seriously the perspective on policy-making as an outcome of political processes between different agencies all defending their own institutionally shaped views of what actions the national interest seems to require in any given case (see, however, George, 1980)? How relevant a criterion is the short-term reduction of international tensions from a broad, strategic geopolitical perspective? Yet, on the other hand, Janis and others rightly assert that their interpretation of process-outcome linkages is, at least, not contradicted or disconfirmed by empirical evidence. Others remain critical. In fact, the article was followed by a rather sharp polemic with Welch who attacked the article's methodology and main assertions about decision quality, using the Cuban missile crisis case as an example [Welch (1989), Herek, *et al.* (1989), Janis's Cuba 1962 interpretation has also been discussed by Lebow (1981) and McCauley (1990)].

Part of the problem in the discussion on groupthink and decision quality comes from the choice of criteria for assessing decision quality. While Welch's critique focused primarily on Herek *et al.*'s assessment of the decision-making process *in view of* the Janis and Mann criteria, I suspect that many political scientists may challenge *the criteria themselves*. This takes us to the very limits of interdisciplinary theorizing. Janis is a psychologist analyzing and evaluating political decision processes. His analytical instruments, however, are derived largely from psychological studies of decision-making. The seven criteria presented by Janis and Mann do seem to be based on an essentially rationalist, "problem-solving" view of the nature of decision processes. However, in the "organizational" and "political" paradigms of political decision-making discussed earlier, other types of rationality are taken into account. These pertain, for instance, to the symbolic nature of many problem-solving activities (Feldman and March, 1981), the primacy of "domestic" consensus and legitimacy (Lebow, 1981) and the defense of organizationally defined interests and definitions of the common cause (Rosenthal *et al.*, 1991). Adhering to this limited functionalist

perspective on rationality and decision quality, Janis and his associates run the risks of propagating a one-sided view of success and failure of policy decisions. As Jervis (1989, p.442) has observed, “. . . psychologists . . . often neglect the possibility that what appear to be errors on the part of politicians are really devious strategies for seeking less than admirable goals. Thus, a statesman who seems inconsistent or confused may be seeking the support of opposed factions.” George (1980) has already indicated that high-level decision-makers are constantly trading off competing requirements: analytically-sound problem-solving, engendering and maintaining support and legitimacy, and managing scarce decision resources such as time and expertise. From this perspective, one could go on to point to recent studies that have indicated that it may be very effective for political decision-makers to adopt seemingly “irrational” stances and policies (Brunsson, 1985; Dror, 1971; Mandel, 1984). Finally, Wildavsky’s (1988) fascinating study of the management of risks has made it clear that “the secret of safety lies in danger,” in other words, what some would consider irresponsible and reckless policies regarding the stimulation of high-risk technologies and experiments will be regarded by others—taking a different time perspective, adopting a different ideological viewpoint—as manifestations of wise statesmanship.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. The debate on the quality of processes and outcomes of decision-making is, ultimately, a political one. It is loaded with complex issues of value judgment. For example, Wildavsky’s book can easily be read as much a political manifesto as a modern-day defense of liberal capitalism and the entrepreneurial spirit. It is highly critical of many social interventions mitigating the development of hazardous technologies, as the latter are viewed as the key to long-term economic and social progress: “richer is safer versus poorer is sicker”. Likewise, one might speculate to which extent Janis’s study on groupthink reflects its author’s conviction about many American foreign policy initiatives involving the use of military force in foreign countries. It is perhaps no coincidence that the two cases of policy success—where groupthink was avoided—were also instances where policy-making was directed toward prevention of large-scale military force (Marshall plan, Cuba 1962). Many political psychologists studying international relations have shared these concerns, and have taken more explicitly “dovish” positions (see White, 1986; Jervis 1989).

### Concluding Remarks

The fact that, at present, we can only speculate about such issues alerts us to an important development required in psychological studies of political decision-making, namely the introduction of greater *political* sophistication. Janis’s con-

tribution to the evaluation of the quality of policymaking is undoubted, if only for his unusually clear distinction between quality of process and quality of outcomes. Yet it is necessary to go beyond his work and try to integrate other types of rationality and policy evaluation into our analytical frameworks (see Farnham, 1990).

The debate on groupthink and decision quality will continue. Meanwhile groupthink theory has made a main contribution by taking it from rather abstract into very concrete judgment on quality of decision process and outcomes in the context of important events, for example in major international crises.

Equally important, by its intricate blend of small-group dynamics and political decision-making, Janis's work on groupthink has inspired many interdisciplinary efforts. It stands out as a clear, if still developing, example of the need for analysis of policy and politics to probe multilevel explanations rather than continuing to maintain rationalistic assumptions about individual and collective policy choices. Also, groupthink and other psychological concepts provide a very useful counterweight to the strong meso-level bias of organizational and political paradigms. A task ahead is to further try to integrate these various approaches, levels of analyses and research methodologies. Such a move to incorporate (individual and) small-group levels of analysis into more comprehensive research designs should, however, always be based on a clear understanding of the inherent limitations of (social-)psychological approaches. In this respect, it is ironic to note that despite Janis's own exemplary caution in outlining each step in the analytical sequence of a case analysis (in particular in his Watergate case study), the very popularity of groupthink may, in fact, act as an impediment to careful interdisciplinary integration. This emerges clearly from the uncritical adoption of sections on "the dangers of groupthink" in many policy analysis and management handbooks.

In the meantime, it is worthwhile to establish with greater precision the antecedents and dynamics of groupthink, and arrive at better-grounded diagnostics of *when*, *how*, and *why* groupthink occurs. From there on, we can follow Janis's lead in trying to prevent or mitigate groupthink, as well as further explore its potential positive functions in specific types of decision situations. This should be done by social scientists from different disciplines using different methodologies.

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