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1 On Groupthink

Originally formulated by Janis in 1972, groupthink serves as a model to explain the irrational decision-making (Janis 1972) and incentive-structure distortion that may occur in foreign policy. Specifically, groupthink is a decision-making pathology that ostracizes dissenters, encourages conformity, and creates pseudo-unanimity within a group that often leads to problematic decision-making.

There are often three markers of a group susceptible to groupthink. Firstly, groupthink tends to occur in small groups. Because small groups are more likely to be homogeneous, they are also more likely to have a structured in-group mentality. Small groups are also easier settings for mindguard enforcement as fewer people must be monitored. Next, groupthink requires the existence of these aforementioned mindguards (Janis 1972) - individuals that ostracize critics of the group in order to maintain pseudo-unanimity. By ostracizing dissenters, mindguards can prevent any challenges to the existing group preferences and leads to self-censorship by group members. Finally, the group leader must have a strong preference. Without a strong opinion by an influential figure, mindguards have little to guard and new ideas may be debated. Indeed, the literature confirms this. Janis identifies eight key markers of groupthink, including an illusion of unanimity, self-censorship, direct pressure on dissenters, and the emergence of self-appointed mindguards (Janis 1972).

Stressors upon a group may also catalyze groupthink. This stress may increase group unification, strengthening their in-group mentality as this stress is another characteristic group members share. This aligns with t'Hart's argument that groupthink may occur in any situation where a small group exhibits "stress-induced cohesiveness" or needs a de facto leader in times of stress (t'Hart 1990).

Altogether, groupthink stifles the emergence of new ideas and alternatives, which fundamentally distorts the incentive structure and leads to an improper cost-benefit analysis.

2 Groupthink & Vietnam

The United States' decision to both begin and continue fighting a futile war in Vietnam at the expense of tax dollars and American lives was a result of groupthink. Indeed, decision-making groups during the Vietnam war exhibited all the aforementioned markers of groupthink.

2.1 Small Group

Firstly, the Vietnam decision-making group was small. Key decision-makers included then-president Johnson, the vice president, cabinet, and a handful of expert advisors known as the "Wise Men" (Kramer 1998). Interestingly, Johnson's group became smaller over time as US involvement in the war increased (Presidential Advisors Forum). As aforementioned, this small, somewhat homogeneous group was the perfect breeding ground for groupthink given its significant in-group bias and potential for mindguards.

2.2 Strong Opinions

Secondly, the group leader, President Johnson, had a strong preference with regard to Vietnam. Despite the initial hesitation of his vice president and closest advisor, Johnson took a strong, militaristic approach to Vietnam (Presidential Advisors Forum). Johnson's stubborn opinion therefore constituted the strong preference held by a leader.

2.3 MindGuarding

Thirdly, there were mindguards amongst the decision-making group. Most notably, Johnson himself became a mindguard over time. While he initially welcomed dissenting views from both the Wise Men and his cabinet at the start of the war, he quickly took on a zero-tolerance approach towards dissent, even removing some critics from the decision-making table (Presidential Advisors Forum, Library of Congress Microfilm

2004). This crackdown and ostracism constitutes mindguarding and likely led to both self-censorship and pseudo-unanimity.

2.4 Stressors

Finally, a strong stressor was placed upon the decision-making group. Widespread acceptance of the Domino Effect (Kramer 1998) meant that Vietnam was considered an important conflict in the fight against communism. Given the effects of losing Vietnam to communism during the Cold War, the decision-making group quickly turned to groupthink.

2.5 Groupthink

These factors eventually led to the decision to continue the war in Vietnam, despite overwhelming evidence that this was a bad decision. Policy-makers that were originally critics of entering and continuing the war gave public statements supporting it - a testament to the groupthink that occurred. Because the decision-making group for US action in Vietnam was under the influence of groupthink, their incentive structure was distorted and led them to make decisions that hurt the American people.

3 Groupthink Experiments

Consider a simple three-part experiment to understand the effects of groupthink on decision-making. This experiment will consist of a pre-survey, group session, and a post-survey and will focus on a fictitious foreign policy issue.

During the pre-survey, participants will be asked to read a brief snippet about the issue and select their preferred policy prescription, ranging from passive to radical solutions.

Participants will then be asked to join a discussion regarding the issue. Participants in the control group will join a group of 4 actors that have varied opinions. Participants in the treatment group will join a group of 3 actors and 1 lead actor. This lead actor will have a strong opinion on the foreign policy issue and attempt to ostracize dissenters.

Finally, participants will fill out a post-survey identical to the pre-survey. We may expect to see the greatest response differences in the treatment group as a result of groupthink.

4 Works Cited

1. Janis, Irving. (1972) *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascos*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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