Evaluating Janis ‘Groupthink’ model of faulty decision making in groups

PS2030 Social Psychology

Word count: 2,100
Two heads are better than one is a common misconception people have that group discussions and decisions are better than working individually. Unfortunately group decision making may not be more beneficial than working on one’s own. Historically speaking terrible decisions have been made as a result of group discussions such as the Bay of Pigs fiasco under Eisenhower and Kennedy and the Challenger disaster (Hogg & Vaughan, 2013). Janis (1972) created the Groupthink model to explain faulty decision making in groups. He proposed the Groupthink model as a medical condition that infected group and has antecedents, symptoms and treatments. Groupthink is defined as a state of thinking in groups that places large emphasis on unanimity, which leads to accepting unrealistic final decision as a result of having a poor decision making process (Janis, 1972).

Janis (1972) established eight symptoms that diagnose groupthink, by analysing the decision making process of historical case studies such as Bay of Pigs, pearl harbour and North Korea fiasco (Hogg & Vaughan, 2013). The first category consists of symptoms that emphasises conformity. 1) Personal pressure for members to conform to the group idea or leaders’ ideas, this leads to discouraging of voicing objections. This results in 2) self-censorship of members that disagree with the decision or have doubt but refrain from stating their opinion. 3) The self-emerging mind-guards that restrict and control the information the group has access to. 4) The illusion of unanimity within in the group due to self-censorship. Second category is illusions of overestimation of group. 5) The group have an illusion of invulnerability in which the group overestimates their power and ability to handle the decision. 6) Illusion of morality of the group at which group regards decision as moral regardless of the ethical and moral implications of the decision. Last category is the ideology of the group. 7) The stereotyped view of the out-group or rivals as being negative evil or weaker than the in-group. 8) This encourages the group effort to rationalise behaviour and ignore warning sign that will lead to re-evaluation of their decision (Janis, 1983).

Janis (1983) concluded that for groupthink to emerge three antecedent conditions had to be present. The three causes of groupthink are high cohesiveness of the group. The more cohesive the group
is the more likely members would conform to the norms of the group, as members will not want to challenge or lose the comfort of being in the cohesive group. Second structural aspects; the influence of the leader, groups that have powerful leaders are more likely to exhibit groupthink as members will be less inclined to challenge the leader. Further if the opinion of the leader is stated during the discussion, members had higher probability of compliance. The isolation of the group from outside opinions and information, leading to limited information being used to make a judgement is also proposed as a cause of groupthink. The third antecedent is the context of the meeting such as decisional stress, the more difficult and controversial the problem, the more stressful the decision process is for the members. Stress had also been linked with a decline in cognitive processes. Janis (1983) claimed that all antecedent conditions are required for the emergence of groupthink however presence alone did not ensure groupthink will occur. Moreover he highlighted that cohesiveness is the most influential antecedent applicable to all poor decision making processes, after that is leadership (Janis, 1983).

Overall the groupthink model has been supported by context analysis and case studies for example the Challenger shuttle disaster. Moormead (1991) applied the groupthink model on the decision making process and found that symptoms and antecedents of Groupthink were replicated in this fiasco. The challenger disaster happened after a decision was made to launch the shuttle, which result in an explosion caused by a known problem of the O-ring seal not functioning in cold weather. Some key antecedents shown was the isolation and the cohesiveness of the group. The group consisted of high ranked members that had been working together for years in their careers. Further the higher level managers did not meet with the experts (engineers) to discuss their concerns about the O-ring. This lead to the managers ignoring the potential danger of launching in such cold weather. Additionally symptoms of groupthink was also present, direct pressure was placed on engineers that voiced out their doubt by managers asking for validation of why they could not launch. More
pressure was placed on members of management that had doubt, to conform to the group and overrule their concern by self-censorship (Moorhead, Ference, & Neck, 1991). In addition groupthink has been applied to the Watergate cover up by Raven (1974). He also found the causes and symptoms of groupthink present in the cover up. Although suggested that groupthink was not enough to fully explain the causes of poor decision making as some critical aspects highlighted in groupthink such as high cohesiveness was not seen (Raven, as cited in Hart, 1991).

This suggest that the theory has high realism and external validity as groupthink is seen in real life decision making processes. However unless tested empirically there is no control of other factors that could also influence decision making. Further without this evidence the antecedent and symptoms of groupthink cannot be justified (Park, 2000). Research analysing the reliability of groupthink model have found varying results that provide partial support for the model. Testing the groupthink model, case studies and context analyses of groupthink provide support, however empirical studies have only found partial or no support for groupthink (Park, 2000). Moreover even when testing the whole groupthink model, only weak support has been shown (Henningsen, Henningsen, Eden, & Cruz, 2006).

The methodology of Janis’s groupthink model has been largely criticised. The model was created looking at historical case studies of presumably poor decision making processes, resulting in disasters. Janis (1983) then investigated if the groupthink model could apply to the decision making process in the fiascos, if groupthink did affect the decision process it could be determined as the cause of the policy failure (Janis, 1983). This method has been criticised as it heavily relies on Janis to have been objective and non-bias in analysing the case studies, and not to extract information that supported his idea of groupthink (Hart, 1991). It may be that groupthink is a good explanation of faulty decision making in these historical cases because he created the model based on these fiascos however cannot be applied all faulty group decisions.
Janis concluded that the presence of groupthink would always cause poor decision making in groups, inevitable leading to a bad outcome. Other researchers suggest that the presence of groupthink may increase the likelihood of a bad decision making process however does not imply cause and effect (Hart, 1991). Groups can be infected with groupthink thus resulting in a bad decision making processes, however end up agreeing on a good decision with an amazing outcome. Conversely groups that have not been subjected to groupthink and so supposedly have a good decision making process may still end in a failure due unforeseen circumstances (Hart, 1991). Therefore the groupthink model cannot always predict that groups with groupthink and so a poor decision making processes will result in a fiasco. Although, Herek et al (1987) study examining 19 policy making decisions in US presidency supports Janis conclusion. They found a significant relationship between higher quality decision making processes resulted in better outcome decision. Although correlation does not mean causation (Herek, Janis, & Huth, 1987).

Research looking into the symptoms of groupthink show a lack of support for model. Longley et al (1980) stated that the groupthink symptoms Janis proposes is inevitable and will eventually emerge in all group decision making procedures. If self-censorship, limiting of outside information by mind guards and collective rationalising was not present in group decision, a group would not come to a final decision. Moreover having no pressure of a time limit a decision would not be made because of unnecessary re-evaluation of information (Longley and Pruitt 1980). Longley et al (1980) suggest that the most critical symptoms of groupthink is time pressure. Having insufficient time to come to a decision would lead to stress and result in poor decision procedures. However a time pressure could also be beneficial as it would discourage prolonging decision making by overanalysing alternative strategies. In addition the type of problem was also critical; groupthink would be more influential if the problem is a controversial dilemma. This placed a higher demand on group as there is more information and limited solutions to the problem. Groupthink would have little influence on simple less demanding problems. Therefore groupthink should only be applied to group decision that deal with complex dilemma problems at top level group discussions (Longley & Pruitt, 1980).
Research on the presence of antecedents, group cohesiveness and leadership as predictors of the emergence of groupthink. Janis placed emphasis on cohesion that even on its own high cohesiveness could cause groupthink. However this idea is based largely on the group norm. As if the group prioritised encouraging alternative ideas and voicing doubts, then groupthink is less likely to appear (Hart, 1991). De Rivera (1968) looking at Truman’s Korea invasion decision making process showed support for high cohesiveness leading to groupthink (De Rivera, as cited in Hart, 1991). Although most experimental studies have provided little support for cohesiveness. A study by Courtright (1978) focusing on cohesiveness and participative leadership, found that high cohesiveness and directive leadership was a significant factor in low quality decision making (Courtright, 1978). This provides support for Janis Groupthink model as a good explanation of how faulty decision making occurs in groups.

Leana (1985) studied the effect of cohesiveness and leaders behaviour on decision making in four person groups. This study only looked at antecedents that applied to groups and not individual decision making; the other antecedents were controlled for within all groups. In regard to the decision making processes there was no significant difference in the self-censorship depending on the type of leader. However cohesiveness was significant, the cohesive groups showed less self-censorship compared to the non-cohesive groups. This however does not support Janis idea as this study showed that strong group cohesiveness was beneficial to group decision making as they showed less self-censorship (Leana, 1985). This may have been because the cohesive group felt comfortable in sharing their opinions and challenging each other to come to the best solution. However the non-cohesive group may be influenced by groupthink as they try and create a fabricated sense of cohesiveness (Longley & Pruitt, 1980).

Concerning the outcome of the decision there was a significant difference in final decision reached by the groups in the participant leader group compared to the direct leader. However no significant difference was found for cohesiveness and of both leadership and cohesiveness. Questionnaire
analysis also provides support for self-censorship, as there was a significant difference in response based on the type of leader behaviour. There was a lower mean for agreement with the final decision in direct leadership compared to participative leaders (Leana, 1985). This provides support for the role of leadership in the emergence of groupthink.

Flower et al (1977) examined the influence of cohesiveness and open and close leadership types in the decision making process. He concluded that groups with open leaders had significantly more alternative solutions compared to the close leadership style. Cohesiveness was found to be non-significant in the number of solutions brought up. Overall leadership style had more of an impact compared to cohesiveness. This refutes Janis beliefs that cohesiveness is very critical in groupthink and may need to be re-assessed in terms of its importance in the groupthink model. Implication of this is that the role of leadership maybe more important that previously stated in regard to groupthink, which in real life decision making will have a larger influence as leader hold more power in businesses and political settings (Flowers, 1977).

Overall Janis groupthink model is a good model in explaining how faulty decision-making occurs in groups. The model is largely supported by case studies and content analysis. Unfortunately not a lot of empirical evidence has been show to support the model, only partial support at most has been found. More empirical studies are needed to look more in depth at the importance of individual antecedents and symptoms on poor decision making. This would lead to reassessing of groupthink and lead better predications of faulty decision making in groups. Groupthink however provide a good template for other researchers to use to expand knowledge about how poor decision making processes can occur.
References


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