Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application

Fourth Edition

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Chapter 14
Groupthink

Chapter Overview

- Groupthink at a Glance
- Introduction
- Assumptions of Groupthink
- Antecedent Conditions of Groupthink
- Symptoms of Groupthink
- Ways to Prevent Groupthink
- Integration and Critique

Groupthink at a Glance

- Highly cohesive groups frequently fail to consider alternatives

- Consensus-seeking is valued over critical assessment of all the information

- Groups can prematurely make decisions

Introduction

- *Victims of Groupthink* by Irving Janis (1972)

- Groupthink is "a way of deliberating that group members use when their desire for unanimity overrides their motivation to assess all available plans for action"

- Harmony in the group is the primary goal

Introduction

- Government policy examples analyzed for groupthink:

    - U.S. Navy preparedness at Pearl Harbor
    - Pursuit of the North Korean Army on its own territory
    - Bay of Pigs invasion
    - Escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War
    - Watergate cover-up

Assumptions of Groupthink

- Conditions in groups promote high cohesiveness
    - Cohesion arises from a group's attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior
    - Cohesion is easy to recognize, but hard to operationalize

Assumptions of Groupthink

- Group problem solving is primarily a unified process
  - Group members strive to get along
  - Groups are susceptible to affiliative restraints
  - Group members attach greater importance to preservation of the group than to the issues under consideration

Assumptions of Groupthink

- Groups and decision making are frequently complex
  - Groups must understand the alternatives available
  - Members must understand the task at hand
  - Knowing others will judge us leads to task accomplishment
  - Demographic variables impact group dynamics

Antecedent Conditions of Groupthink

- Conditions exist that promote groupthink

  - Group cohesiveness

  - Structural factors

  - Group stress

Antecedent Conditions of Groupthink

- Group cohesiveness
  - Desirable characteristic of group dynamics, but may cause pressure to conform

Antecedent Conditions of Groupthink

- Structural factors
  - Group insulation
  - Lack of impartial leadership
  - Failure to establish clear decision-making procedures

Antecedent Conditions of Groupthink

- Group stress
  - Internal and external causes
  - Under great stress, decision makers tend to break down
  - Stress may cause members to look to one another for moral support

Symptoms of Groupthink

- Antecedents lead to concurrence seeking

- Categories of symptoms of groupthink

  - Overestimation of the group

  - Closed-mindedness

  - Pressures toward uniformity

Symptoms of Groupthink

- Overestimation of the group
  - The erroneous belief that the group is more than it actually is

  - Symptoms in this category
    - Illusion of invulnerability
    - Belief in the inherent morality of the group

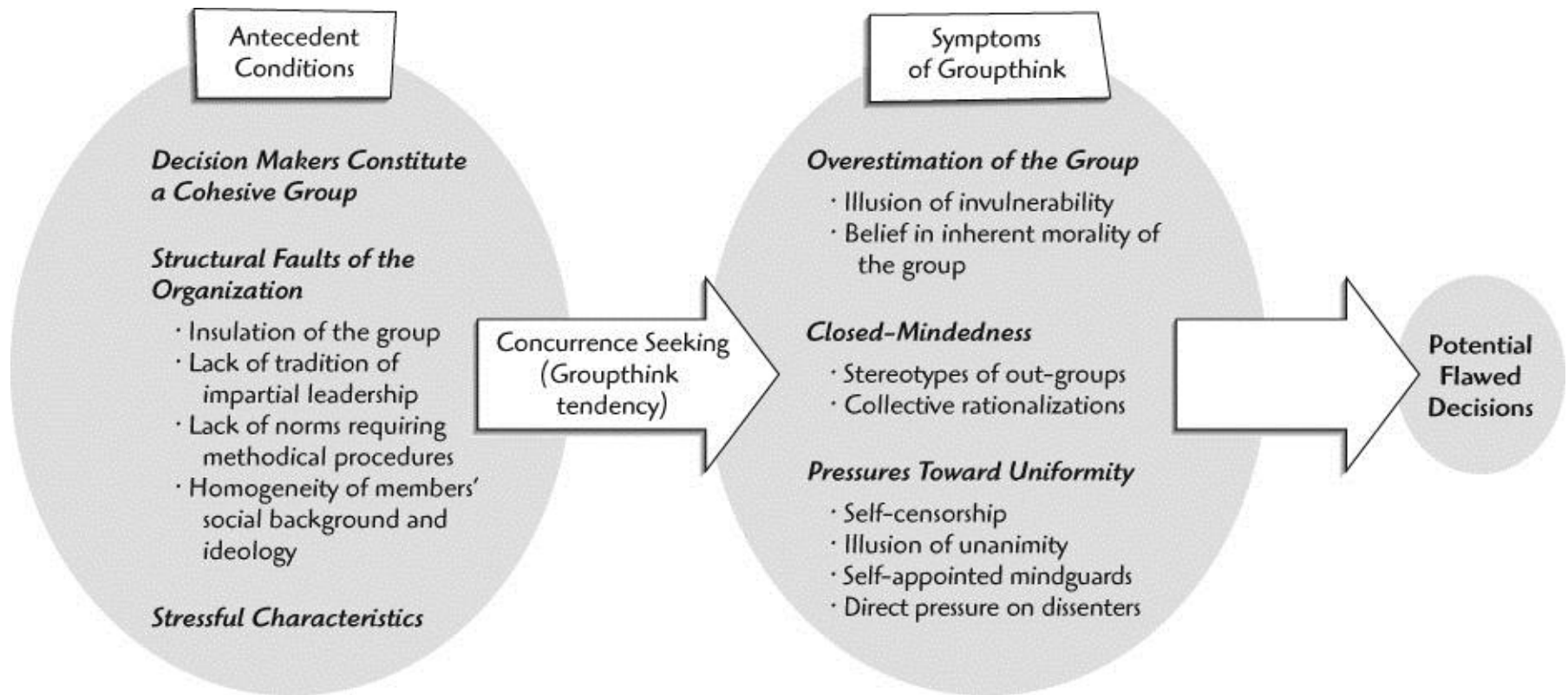# Symptoms of Groupthink

- ## Closed-mindedness
  - ### Willingness of the group to ignore differences in people and warnings about poor group decisions

  - ### Symptoms in this category:
    - Out-group stereotypes
    - Collective rationalization

Symptoms of Groupthink

- Pressures toward uniformity
  - Occurs when group members go along to get along

  - Symptoms of this category:
    - Self-censorship
    - Illusion of unanimity
    - Self-appointed mindguards
    - Pressures on dissenters

Symptoms of Groupthink

Antecedent Conditions

Decision Makers Constitute a Cohesive Group

Structural Faults of the Organization

- Insulation of the group
- Lack of tradition of impartial leadership
- Lack of norms requiring methodical procedures
- Homogeneity of members' social background and ideology

Stressful Characteristics

Concurrence Seeking (Groupthink tendency)

Symptoms of Groupthink

Overestimation of the Group

- Illusion of invulnerability
- Belief in inherent morality of the group

Closed-Mindedness

- Stereotypes of out-groups
- Collective rationalizations

Pressures Toward Uniformity

- Self-censorship
- Illusion of unanimity
- Self-appointed mindguards
- Direct pressure on dissenters

Potential Flawed Decisions

Ways to Prevent Groupthink

Janis's recommendations for vigilant decision making

1. Look at the range of objectives
2. Develop and review action plans and alternatives
3. Explore consequences for alternatives
4. When new information emerges, analyze previously-rejected action plans
5. Have contingency plans

Ways to Prevent Groupthink

t'Hart suggests preventing Groupthink by

1. Requiring oversight and control
2. Embracing whistle-blowing in the group
3. Allowing for objection
4. Balancing consensus and majority rule

Integration

- Communication tradition
  - Socio-cultural
- Communication contexts
  - Small group
  - Organizational
- Approach to knowing
  - Positivistic/empirical

Evaluating Groupthink

- Scope
  - Limited to decision-making groups in crisis situations
- Testability
  - Validity problems with concurrence-seeking
- Heurism
  - Theory is used in a variety of contexts and studies
- Test of time