The Essence of Groupthink
Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure by Paul 't Hart
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Groupthink in Government: A Study of Small Groups and Policy Failure

Small groups are a crucial locus of decision activity within modern governments. As Andrew Semmel and Dean Minix (1979) observed:

> Whatever its label—ad hoc committee, special action group, task force—the small decision unit is frequently the locus of important foreign policy activity.
> Small group deliberations are involved in virtually every phase of the decision process, ranging from information collection and assessment to option identification and recommendation to implementation and post-decision evaluation.
> In many cases, the small decision group is the principal and final decision body itself (p. 251).

Not surprisingly, political scientists have been among those most interested in understanding the nature and impact of small group decision processes. Building on the findings of psychologists and organizational theorists, such scholars as Alexander George (1980), Dean Minix (1982), Yaacov Vertzberger (1990), and Fritz Gaenslen (1992) have contributed greatly to our understanding of the ways in which small group process can affect foreign policymaking.

In seminal contributions to this literature, the late Irving L. Janis (1972; 1982; 1989) coined the widely used, and often misused, concept of “groupthink” to depict a particular form of excessive concurrence-seeking in cohesive groups associated with several U.S. policy fiascoes. The term has subsequently been used by scholars and journalists in the foreign policy field to label almost any kind of questionable group level decision-making process and is often contrasted with its alleged opposite, the conflict-driven bureaucratic politics phenomenon. In his important new book, Groupthink in Government, Dutch scholar, Paul 't Hart further develops Janis' original concept in order to “move groupthink from its present unwarranted popularity resulting in vulgarized applications and quick-and-easy analyses, to the status it deserves, namely to a conceptually and empirically well-founded, contextually sound, and cautiously used explanatory framework” (p.282).

In this disciplined and well-organized volume, 't Hart draws on his extensive knowledge of social psychology to construct the kind of theoretical foundation that has been neglected in previous treatments of the concept, including those by Janis himself. Recognizing that small decision groups operate within administrative and political settings, he adds a new and necessary contextual dimension...
to Janis’ perspective. Thus ‘t Hart presents a significantly revised and conceptually elaborated model of groupthink, which in this reformulation becomes equivalent to a premature and excessive concurrence-seeking that crowds out critical deliberation.

The beginning chapters of the book synthesize an extensive body of literature in social psychology that is relevant to this theoretical foundation, including chapters on cohesiveness, compliance, and deindividuation. Two chapters analyze the effects of groupthink—on risk taking and choice shifts, and on commitment and entrapment respectively. Then the intergroup context is examined in order to provide a better understanding of the external contingencies that can promote the development of groupthink. The one hundred plus pages of intense social psychological analysis conclude with a revised groupthink model. The preconditions, input factors, processes, and outcomes are combined into a sophisticated multi-path understanding of the phenomenon and its policy consequences. This first part of the book is neatly summarized in Chapter Eight.

In this theoretical analysis, ‘t Hart significantly refines and extends Janis’ original conceptualization of groupthink. He identifies three distinct paths to excessive concurrence-seeking in small groups: cohesiveness, deindividuation, and anticipatory compliance. In addition, he categorizes the resulting decision outcomes into two quite different types of groupthink: collective avoidance and collective overoptimism. According to ‘t Hart, the theoretical rationales behind these paths and outcome types differ markedly.

The second third of Groupthink in Government focuses on the linkage between the key features of the political-administrative setting and the three paths toward groupthink that are identified in the initial theoretical chapters. A professor of public administration at Leiden University in the Netherlands, ‘t Hart brings a keen awareness of the wider administrative and political structures and procedures within which decision groups operate. He recognizes that a variety of factors shape public policy and that groupthink “can at best, be only a partial theory, i.e. relevant to only a limited category of decision making events.” The critical task, according to ‘t Hart is to “specify settings and processes where groupthink analysis may be pertinent” (p. 129). He argues that it is “appropriate to delimit the focus (of the analysis) to non-routine problem situations dealt with by the top of the organizational/governmental hierarchy” (p. 136). Clearly, this is a sphere of great relevance to decision-making with respect to foreign and national security policy.

According to ‘t Hart, within governmental settings conflict rather than cohesiveness would appear to be the natural starting point in analyzing decision making. Superficially, this would seem to preclude the groupthink perspective, but ‘t Hart shows that conflict has an important role in encouraging groupthink. He discusses several factors and techniques that tend to reduce fragmentation and conflict in government, and suggests that conflict within government as a whole can breed cohesion within particular factions and units. In short, government is characterized by both conflict and cohesion and the two are mixed in ways that can reinforce those aspects of the decision processes which lead to groupthink.

Hierarchy and compliance in organizations can also create a tendency toward groupthink. According to ‘t Hart, the most salient path runs through the mechanism of anticipatory compliance:

In high-level decision groups, closed leadership styles combined with group or organizational norms of compliance may produce groupthink tendencies. This need not involve overt pressures for conformity, instead the group members are prone to excessive anticipatory compliance with the chief executive’s assumptions, perspectives, and preferred alternatives (p. 177).
The author then proceeds to suggest to what extent anticipatory compliance will lead to groupthink under varying conditions, and how these processes are maintained. This is an important issue with very broad relevance. In a recent study of foreign policy decision making in the Carter Administration, Alexander Moens (1990) reports decision processes (particularly from the early years) which can be interpreted as examples of anticipatory compliance and directive leadership:

There was simply not enough conflict, controversy, even diversity . . . . To make matters worse, the consensus of the advocates more often than not was along the lines of Carter's initial policy beliefs . . . . The advisers did not put the difficult (dissenting) questions on the table, and Carter as a result was not fully aware of the limits of his ideals (p. 48).

In a separate theoretical chapter, 't Hart analyzes the impact of provisions for government accountability on groupthink. The structures for accountability affect the reasoning and calculations of organizational actors within decision groups. In a significant clarification and extension of Janis’ analysis, 't Hart discerns two generically different outcomes of groupthink: collective avoidance and collective overoptimism. The first closely resembles the logic behind Janis' original formulation. It is characterized by low self-esteem among key group members which leads them to seek refuge from threatening information. The second is fundamentally different. It occurs among high-confidence groups who are expecting major policy successes or career advancements. In this case the illusion of invulnerability, noted by Janis, dominates reactions of the group leading to concurrence seeking, overoptimistic assessments, and risk-taking.

In the spirit of Janis (1980) and George (1993), the final section of the book sets out prescriptions for policymakers eager to prevent groupthink in government. It outlines various impediments to ‘decision quality’, but offers no golden formulas for solving the dilemmas posed in any permanent way. “The best one can do,” ’t Hart asserts, “is to continue to try and understand the conditions of success and failure, to rethink standards of evaluating the quality of government, and to produce policy-relevant theories to stimulate improvements” (p. 295). In the final chapter, ’t Hart also presents an ambitious agenda for future research that would extend our understanding of groupthink even further along the theoretically-grounded path he has blazed.

With Groupthink in Government, ’t Hart has significantly enriched the theoretical foundation for the concept of groupthink. He has also broadened the domain of the concept by identifying paths to premature concurrence-seeking even in non-cohesive groups. At the same time, there are a few areas in which ’t Hart’s analysis could be improved.

Curiously missing from ’t Hart’s analysis is a developmental view of the small group. He introduces a distinction between stable and unstable (short-lived, rapidly shifting) groups (p. 140), and treats the two largely separately. By drawing on analyses of the ‘life cycles’ of groups (Tuckman, 1965, Moreland & Levine, 1988), ’t Hart could have provided a more dynamic perspective. This would have allowed him to assess the strength and stability of group norms, rules, roles, and leadership practices along a trajectory of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization and to establish more firmly the linkage between these factors and the prospects for groupthink. For example, newly formed groups lack a group-specific sub-culture. Member uncertainty and insecurity seem to make such groups particularly susceptible to directive leadership from one or more assertive members, leading to premature concurrence-seeking: a “Newgroup Syndrome” (Stern & Sundelius, 1993). Such ad hoc decision units may also be more susceptible to the kind of anticipatory compliance identified
by 't Hart. More established groups will instead be strongly affected by their highly developed sub-culture and previous experience of success or failure (pp. 106, 122).

As noted above, one of 't Hart's major contributions to the theory of groupthink is his exploration of the relationships between cohesion and conflict as sources of groupthink tendencies. While some scholars regard conflict dynamics (such as 'bureaucratic politics') as largely incompatible with premature concurrence-seeking (classic groupthink), cohesion and loyalty within the group may take a variety of forms in part depending on the co-existing conflict dynamics. Even where horizontal rivalries exist (among advisers), the group may be bound together by loyalty to the leader (p. 12). Using a wheel as an analogy, groups may be cohesive along the spokes (advisors loyal to a central figure), along the rim (among advisers), or both. Incorporating an inter-group perspective, 't Hart asserts that the pattern of conflict with outgroups may be an important reason for the specific pattern of in-group cohesion.

However, 't Hart's analysis does not fully explore this point. Recent literature (Janis, 1989:55–56; Maoz, 1990) suggests that manipulation of group decision processes may involve a subtle mix of cohesion and conflict. Manipulation entails the implementation of a hidden agenda by one or more group members, through the deliberate structuring of the process or the substantive information base. 't Hart devotes only cursory attention to this topic. While successful manipulation may manifest itself at the group level as premature concurrence-seeking, it is actually the result of a deviously engineered consensus which may exploit the relaxed atmosphere of a cohesive group or the natural tentativeness on the part of the members of a newly formed group. This kind of manipulation, however, implies intense, though latent, conflict. If resistance to the preferred course of action were not anticipated by the manipulator, manipulative tactics would not be necessary. However, the group level consequences of manipulation may be difficult to distinguish empirically from groupthink as defined by 't Hart.

At various places in the book, 't Hart refers to the effects of group norms, inter-group conflict, and the group's politico-organizational setting on both the group and its members. His approach raises the so-called level of analysis problem that has been critical to international relations scholarship. In short, small groups are aggregations of individuals, but they are also more than the sum of their parts, exhibiting a capacity for collective choice and action. 't Hart shows sensitivity to this duality by including both a structural perspective and a 'bottom up' approach in his analysis. He also observes McCauley's (1989) distinction between member internalization and compliance, noting that both can contribute to premature concurrence-seeking. Yet, the conceptual terminology employed by 't Hart does not facilitate an integrated view of these cross-level relationships.

How can a unified conceptualization of the relationship between individual and recursively overlapping collectives—such as faction, group, and organization—be achieved? One answer may be found in contemporary social theory where individual behavior is seen as enabled and constrained by relationships with multiple, overlapping collective identities. Facions, groups, and organizations exhibit structural properties such as norms, rules, and roles as well as constellations of status, power, and resources. Each are structures (looking 'inward' to their component agents) and agents (looking 'outward' to wider socio-political arenas). In developing the capacity for collective action, these structures exert important influences on individual member (and smaller scale collective agent) components. Thus the agency-structure problematic noted by international relations scholars, such as Alexander Wendt (1987), Martin Hollis & Steve Smith (1990) and Walter Carlsnaes (1992), is highly relevant also to understand-
ing complex cross-level impacts on policy decision making and could provide an integrative perspective for consideration of cross-level effects.

't Hart applies his groupthink approach to decision-making at high governmental levels through a chapter-length examination of the Reagan Administration's secret arms-for-hostages deals with Iran (the Iran-Contra Affair). In designing his case study, 't Hart clearly seeks to maximize its usefulness in theory building. It is structured around a cluster of research questions related to contextual factors and preconditions, process dynamics, and decision outcomes. It ends with reflections on how observations from the case feed back into the fundamental task of theory-building.

Maintaining readability while implementing a theoretically-driven empirical agenda is a serious challenge. The author manages to provide an engaging account of the case while incorporating the analytical perspectives outlined in the research design. Conscious of the dangers of massaging a case in order to make it fit into a pre-selected theoretical scheme (p. 266), t'Hart makes convincing use of a wide range of empirical source materials. He acknowledges uncertainties and contradictions in the record, and where alternative interpretations are plausible, he presents them openly along with his preferred explanation. While this sensitivity to the subtleties of historical research may not be fashionable, it serves to enhance the credibility of his claims.

From his analysis 't Hart concludes that "groupthink seems to have played a major part in U.S. decision making concerning the revision of its policies vis-à-vis Iran and the Lebanon hostage crisis in the period of May 1985 to November 1986. Virtually all of the preconditions and process dynamics of the revised model were encountered in the available case evidence" (p. 279). Thus the case study appears to demonstrate the plausibility of his revised model of groupthink.

A significant caveat is in order, however, as 't Hart recognizes (p. 267), despite a number of high profile meetings of the NSC principals (December 7, 1985 and January 7, 1986), that the primary decision unit in this case was not a small group in the usual sense of a limited number of individuals interacting on a multi-lateral, face-to-face basis. Interactions tended to be among pairs of individuals (Reagan, Casey, McFarlane, Poindexter, North). "There were very few occasions at which the group as a whole would actually meet. Rather, the members were interacting intensively on a bilateral basis" (p. 235).

Social psychologists, however, tend to believe that dyads (and trios) exhibit different dynamic patterns than larger groups of individuals. (See, for example, George, 1980; Levine & Moreland, 1990.) If the decision unit in this case was not a small group in the usual sense, what was it? Perhaps it was an example of a cohesive policy network (Powell, 1990; Jordan, 1990; Hult, 1993) with a marked tendency to exclude dissenters. Such an ideologically homogenous network might well exhibit tendencies toward concurrence-seeking that are similar to those noted in small groups. These kinds of alternative decision unit configurations should be compared and contrasted more rigorously in the future.

Honest and refreshingly modest, 't Hart openly acknowledges the limitations of his approach:

The analysis of the present study suggests that groupthink is a significant but limited threat to the quality of policymaking. It is significant in the sense that if policy decision groups working on major, non-routine, controversial policy issues do fall prey to groupthink tendencies, there is a risk that they will go for decisions that are ill-considered and reckless. This comes out very clear from the revised model. However, it has also become clear that the threat posed by groupthink is limited, in the sense that the set of preconditions of groupthink as depicted in the model makes only a modest number of policy decision processes actually meet this description (p. 281).
Does this mean that the small group approach to foreign policy decision analysis is of marginal relevance? We believe that ‘t Hart’s sober assessment of his own work is a plausible answer to an overly narrow question. His groupthink-as-concurrence-seeking focus may not be broad enough to generate a rich understanding of the complex role of the small group in high level policy making.

As indicated in our opening quote and as suggested by Vertzberger (1990:217), groups fulfill an essential bridging function in the making and implementing of policy in complex organizational environments. Perhaps the critical issue is not only to explain excessive concurrence seeking (admittedly an important and difficult task), but rather to identify the types of interaction patterns typical of small policy groups, and the contextual and group structures associated with each of these patterns. This more comprehensive research focus would include further elaborations of the different paths to premature concurrence-seeking, more examinations of the group level effects of conflict dynamics, and studies of complex hybrids, such as manipulation in small group settings.

*Groupthink in Government* stands out as a major contribution to the theoretical literature on foreign policymaking (and domestic policymaking for that matter). 't Hart successfully integrates large bodies of multi-disciplinary literature in identifying the social psychological underpinnings and the political-administrative context of groupthink. The revised Janis-'t Hart model extends the phenomenon to non-cohesive groups. Thus, the author has taken a major step forward by asking, and making important progress in answering questions about the causes and consequences of premature concurrence-seeking in small, high-level policy groups. This book belongs on the shelf of any scholar with a serious interest in foreign policy decision making. It may also serve as a sophisticated overview of the state-of-the-art thinking on group decision-making for advanced undergraduate and graduate students. We applaud the recent decision by the Johns Hopkins University Press to release a paperback edition of this important European book.

References


