What Are The Theoretical And Practical Issues Which Arise From The Notion Of ‘groupthink’ ? Essay, Research Paper

In the field of group dynamics, Janis (1972) has recognised that a particular combination of group characteristics can cause disastrous decisions: he labels these characteristics and their outcomeas ‘groupthink’, defined as ‘a deterioration of mental efficiency and moral judgement that results from in-group pressures’ (Janis, 1972). From his archival studeis of some recent American government decisional ‘fiascos’, Janis found a set of conditions which created an atmosphere causing poor decision-making; although there has been very little research since Janis proposed his theory, both theoretical and practical issues arise from it. One disastrous decision that Janis studies was the invasion of Cuba’s Bay of Pigs in 1961, which he describes as ‘the perfect failure’. The advisory group contained the brightest and most able people in the USA, yet all their fundamental assumptions were incorrect; for example, they assumed that the Cuban airforce was weak and ineffective despite losing half of their American bombers to them. Similar examples can be found in Europe: the decision by Britain’s National Coal Board to ignore warning about a possible coal tip slide in Aberfan, Wales, in order to save time and money, resulted in the 1966 tragedy of burying the local school and decimating an entire community. Decision such as this, argues Janis, can be explained by groupthink. It is important to recognise the antecedent conditions of groupthink. The most important is a high level of group cohesiveness: the mebers are attracted to each other and to the group goal, and display concurrence-seeking tendencies, or the desire to maintain the atmosphere of the group by agreeing with the common view. The more insulated from outside influences the group is, the more likely it is to suffer from groupthink, because there is lttle opportunity for members to hear and discuss the views of impartial outsiders, who may make suggestions that the group had not considered. Similarly, a lack of methodical procedures for the search of information means that vital material may not be heard. Style of leadership is crucial: if a leader is very directive, i.e. makes his opinions known and exerts pressure on members to agree with him, groupthink will result, as members revise their opinions to coincide with that of the leader. Finally, when there is a high level of stress and a low degree of hope of finding a better solution (i.e. in a crises situation), members become convinced that their decision is a good one. Groupthink is manifested in several ways. The group believes it is invulnerably, which encourages it to take risks and not consider failure. There is a collective rationalisation of decision, a belief in the inherent morality of the group, and enemies are stereotyped as evil. Anyone who voices a contrary opinion is quashed, and members censor themselves so that such opinions are rarely heard. The group believes it is unanimous, and ‘mind guards’ appoint themselves to protect the group from adverse information. The symptoms give rise to the effects of defective decision making: incomplete survey of alternatives, failure to examine the risks of the preferred choice, poor information search, selective bias in information processing, and failure to work out contingency plans. Janis’ theory has been supported by Tetlock (1979), who performed content analysis on the speeches of decision makers in times of crises, and found very similar results. Several issues arise from Janis’ theory. A problem for group cohesiveness is posed: what level of cohesiveness is desirable? A reasonable level is necessary for the efficient functioning of a group: to a point, more cohesive groups are more productive that less choesive ones (Norris and Niebuhr, 1980), because members feel an affiliation to each other and a desire to reach group goals. however, if choesion is tto strong, groupthink may occur. The solution must be to have only a moderate degree of choesion; enough for members to want to achieve group goals, but not so much that members become blind to themselves. It is important to remember, nevertheless, that Flower’s 1997 study, in which he varied levels of cohesion and leadership style, found that level of choesion is irrelevant to groupthink. This theoretical issue needs clarifying before guidelines on cohesion can be given. Leadership is evidently an iportant issue in groupthink, perhaps the central one, and Janis’ theory has many implications for the style and personality that make the ‘best’ leader in a crisis situation. The leader must realise the power and influence of his position, and be aware of groupthink. He must modify his style, if necessary, from a directive tradition to a position in which he makes it known to group members that he is willing to consider any suggestion, and that his mind is not already made up. The leader must be impartial and encourage questions and the airing of doubts (see Janis and Mann, 1977). If a leader puts these suggestions into practice, he should see his group making good decisions. From a more practical perspective, groupthink has many implications, which should be taken seriously. Many major decision are made by groups, and these groups tend to be insulated, under pressure and made up of like-minded individuals. The classic situation is that of a jury. Myers and Kaplan (1976) simulated a jury procedure, where subjects were to arrive at a decision based on real evidence of traffic offences. It was found that after group discussions, members were more extreme in their decisions (of either guilty or not guilty) than before, suggesting that being in a group situation gave them security in their opinions due to the cohesive atmosphere. Kaplan and Miller (1978) found similar results, with a mock trial involving attempted manslaughter: before group discussion, members had varying opinions, but afterwards they converged. Groupthink should be taken into account in other groups as well, such as clinical groups, or committees and boards of directors, who tend to be particularly insulated and often under a very directive leadership. In such situations, problems are often caused because group members do not see themselves as part of a social siystem. Seating arrangements should be modified, so that maximum eye contact is possible, and so members are not seated in a rigid order of influence. In general, one may say that an awareness of the problem will lead to its solution (Napier and Gerschenfeld, 1989). Perhaps the most important practical issue arising from groupthink is the worrying evidence about how much under its influence governements can be during critical situation. Janis mentions four US fiascos – the Bay of Pigs, the escalation of the Korean war, Pearl Harbour and the escalation of the Vietnam War. There are numerous other decision across the world throughout history – for example the much criticised Gulf War of 1991. It seems reasonable to question how much of the optimism of the US Government was actually a product of groupthink on the part of the War Council. The Iraqi Government was stereotyped as evil, and Americans were certain of the ‘rightness’ of their decisions. Similarly, the images from Iraq suggested that confidence there was equal to that of the US – there can be no doubt that Saddam Hussein was a very directive leader throughout the crisis situation. This gives food for though about the truth value of any news made known. Due to the potentially serious consequences of issues arising from groupthink, every effort should be made to prevent it. Janis (1982) has made several suggestions for this. The most fundamental preventative measure is to make all group members aware of groupthink. The importance of the role of the leader hsa been discussed above. One or more members should be assigned ‘devil’s advocate’ i.e. to question every suggestion so that all angles may be considered. The group should occasionally be subdivided, so that subgroups can meet separately, then join together and compare views. Care should be taken not to view the opponents in a stereotypically ‘evil’ way, nor regard them as unintelligent or careless. Outside opinions sohuld be brought in by experts who are not connected to the group. Each member should have time to consider his views and discuss them. Finally, after a decision has been made there should be another meeting where alternative options are considered and it is possible to change the decision. If these issues are taken into account, groupthink should be avoided. Groupthink, as proposed by Janis to account for some of the faulty decisions of groups, is obviously an important phenomenon which can have many wide ranging and serious consequences. It causes several issues to arise, both theoretical and practical, but if the necessary measures are taken, it should be possible to avoid it. However, it is important to remember that not all faulty decisions are caused by groupthink, so one should not presume that the elimination of groupthink will necessarily produce good decisions. approx 1,600 words. 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