

Bolan Cherry  
ENC3312  
Instructor Sanchez  
11/27/2016

### **Final Argumentation Essay: Groupthink**

Many people go about their lives, day to day, believing that their actions are dictated by their own wants and desires. This is actually much more rare than people realize; almost every facet of our lives are influenced by what we see people doing and saying around us, be it in the media or firsthand. There is nothing inherently wrong with this aspect of human interaction, in fact the cooperation and empathy can cause great things. That said, sometimes these urges to assimilate can lead people to act in ways that completely go against their values or belief systems. These acts of social compliance are often referred to as groupthink. There are many examples of groupthink that have been analyzed throughout history, but we are not excluded from it in modern society. In fact, through things like the internet and media, groupthink can impact society on a global scale. Due to the polarizing nature of political and social issues this day and age it can be very difficult for the masses to recognize when their movement or ideology is being tarnished through groupthink. No group or faction is completely immune to the potential of groupthink; seemingly rational people can fall into a state of compliance by adding one element to the group, and that's fear. Fear of harm, fear of authority, fear of not fitting in, or fear of failing; once people are afraid of something they take cues from those around them as a way to gauge what a best possible solution would be based on the people suggesting the course of action. This can be through quantity of people or perceived quality of a leader. Groupthink is rarely recognized through introspection, but is often studied in hindsight. Individuals will of course believe that their convictions and precepts are totally justified and rational. This includes nonconformists who actively distance themselves from a group they deem immoral; their values are not original or exclusive to them. Even someone who considers themselves an individual or free thinker may just cherry pick aspects of virtues and ethics that they are exposed to throughout their lives.

Look at some of the most famous cases of groupthink like the Salem witch trials or the massacres at the Japanese battle of Nanking. Fear pushed these people to do absolutely heinous things that many of them would not do unless perpetuated through that powerful emotion. The Japanese soldiers were following orders; fear of what might happen if they disobeyed had socially sanctioned the acts in their minds. The people of Salem were convinced that those women were hellspawn out to do harm to them and their property. Of course, these notions in their minds did not just appear out of thin air. The ideas were planted from somewhere and despite the intent, those ideas lead to some truly horrific scenes.

Groupthink does not just happen, more than often there is someone calling the shots that has the trust of their people. Be it a protest organizer or politician, a charismatic leader holds great power when it comes to inciting people to act a certain way. This is

why Adolf Hitler is considered to be one of the most successful leaders ever. He incited the people of his country to let him conduct a genocide. These people weren't all psychopaths, they were normal people that that he conditioned through his rhetoric and government programs. Once a radical takes the reins in a movement all bets are off when it comes to the future ethics of how the group is conducted. Those who subscribe to contest these radicals are perceived to be just as corrupt by the other side.

One of my favorite examples that can apply research on radical groupthink in modern society is the infamous “cult of outrage”. These people belong to varying social factions that claim to be fighting for some kind of justice. This consists of certain factions of feminism, social justice warriors, etc...

When a radical in a leadership position, be it small or large, puts their extreme views on the table it can whip these groups into a frenzy. They all have an intense, paranoid fear of oppression and injustice. Keep in mind that often times these cults of outrage are not representative of the entire movement they claim to align with, but they are such a vocal minority that they overshadow any rational arguments and completely tarnish the movement. What makes these groups particularly susceptible to groupthink is their tendency to personalize everything; if one of them is victimized, then they all are victimized. This is a powerful catalyst that keeps them standing in solidarity. That alone is not what turns this into groupthink; remember that these sects of social factions get their stances from radical people that they identify with. This means that they tend to be easily challenged in a logical debate. Here is where groupthink kicks in. These people are surrounded by others that have a united perspective of how the world works; so while establishing a dialogue with people challenging those views, their sheer numbers refrain them from conceding. Even if someone feels that the opposing arguments are valid, chances are they will not speak up in that moment because of groupthink; they will not betray their side. Due to them lacking a rational counter argument many of these groups resort to hostile character attacks on their challengers or sometimes even physical violence to justify themselves. The flawed logic perpetuated being that their level of outrage correlates to a level of justification. They will shut down debate and refuse to hear other opinions because of this. Some people are even calling situations like this “social decay”.

The moment a group refuses to acknowledge opposing views is when groupthink really takes hold. Mike Bagshaw’s academic journals discuss the importance of diversity of thought when it comes to logical decisions. Groups often become complacent and suffer from conformity within themselves. If diversity of thought is established and executed early on it can potentially prevent instances of groupthink. The abrasive viewpoints must be tackled head on to maintain a productive and cohesive stream of ideas. The problem with the cult of outrage is that their refusal to accept diversity of thought makes it nearly impossible to communicate opposition with them. This is of course in no way limited to the radical groups; seemingly rational people will often flounder in a crowd when they are challenged and cannot rebuttal. When the wits are at their end, these people will fall back on the social compliance of their peers to justify themselves. The sad thing is that all it may take is one person to keep their group

checked, but that prospect is a terrifying one because of the potential repercussions. Groups that are running on social compliance to justify their stances often favor character attacks over logical reasoning. In the case of the cult of outrage, calling someone a fascist because they do not agree with you sates their collective justification quota.

Allegiance to a tribe can offer someone the illusion of invulnerability, often attained through some sort of rationalization. The zealots within the cult of outrage enable opposing challengers to completely dismantle many of these movements. Due to these radical sects, many people attack the entire movement. Groups like feminism and Black Lives Matter will often condemn the actions of some subgroups, attempting to distance themselves from the scrutiny. Alas, this falls under the “no true Scotsman fallacy”. Simply saying that people who perform a certain action are not a part of your group does not make it so. This has made it open season for such groups as they are constantly defamed and held in contempt by much of the population. This causes these factions to plant their feet even harder as they attempt to stand their ground against claims of unethical behavior, of course not conceding due to the amount of support they can maintain within their own social contracts.

It is important to know that the people who oppose the cult of outrage and its constituent parts are not exempt from groupthink at all. In fact, these social factions are so potent that rival groups have even been formed to combat them. For example, the cult of outrage has the Alt-right movement on the opposite side of its spectrum. Alt-right basically consists of everything the extreme left-wing views of the cult of outrage despise and it was created specifically to destroy the political correctness of feminism and social justice warriors. Alt-right is a prime example of how groupthink has gone global in modern times through the power of the internet. With the anonymity that comes with online interactions there are zero inhibitions exhibited when these two clashing ideologies interact. It has all become so toxic that simply expressing an opinion of one side will get you vicious attacks on your character from the other. As time goes on these competing factions become larger and no one seems interested in listening to each other at all. It has all become so saturated with groupthink that many hold the mentality that if you are not with me, then you are against me. The social pressure is often times too great for anyone to branch off from the herd. Even those who claim to be independent can never be truly exempt from social pressures. Their values are instilled from somewhere and even they get justification from those with similar beliefs. What’s important is being able to recognize malice to determine when a group or movement goes bad. Even still, trying to recognize it is difficult because it requires you to confront and ignore personal biases.

If you are trying to find the closest thing to a systematic guide that can be used prevent groupthink, The Santa Clara University offers a very good resource of ethical decision making. There is a reason that business practices include strict ethics. The fact that people need a set of guidelines to act in a fair manner just goes to show that we are very impressionable creatures. The struggle is determining whether a situation is being corrupted by groupthink or whether fair, productive cooperation is taking place. Applying

some ethical tests to what people are doing is a socially acceptable way to determine the morality of their actions.

A few examples of ethical decision making are the utilitarian approach, rights approach, fairness approach, common good approach and the virtue approach. One thing that adds to the complexity of recognizing groupthink is that some approaches work better than others in certain situations and not every ethical test will yield the same result. For example, the virtues approach may prove difficult in groupthink because everyone has different virtues that they follow throughout their lives. In my opinion a utilitarian approach seems the most applicable in regard to mass movements or people working toward a common goal. It takes into account everyone affected and treats people as equals. A utilitarian test strives to determine a best possible outcome and includes the welfare of all parties. Outcomes are measured by happiness, preferences of individuals and perhaps monetary results. Even still, what makes a person or group happy is subjective, which adds to the complexity of determining good decision making. Vastly different perspectives can drive a wedge between communication because each side thinks the other will never understand them.

Unfortunately, you cannot reason with someone that refuses to be reasoned with. One of the aspects of groupthink is a shared illusion; if enough people share the illusion then it will be virtually impossible to crack the mindguard that keeps their social contract unbroken. That being said, there is an interesting social stigma that comes with being a nonconformist. As a society we value the independent thinker, but also shun those who turn away from the pack. With these pressures many would rather just be accepted. We cannot expect people to dismiss the views that have influenced them. From Susan Cain's groupthink article comes one of the most important things I learned from my research; it is to never underestimate yourself when you are alone. The good work that people can do independently is well worth any stigma that might come with it. It is important to know that you never have to pick a side in these situations, groupthink and social compliance compels people to align themselves, but often times that can just fuel the hate speak. Not being aligned frees your perspectives not for your benefit or the benefit of the factions, but for others who are unsure on what to think. Offering up your independent values or perspective may be divisive, but diversity of thought is key for productive debate or problem solving.

No man is an island; in some way, shape or form we are all a cog within a greater society. Groupthink may come from human nature, but it often threatens the humanity from which it is derived, be that morally or physically. Changing others who are set in their views sometimes seems like an impossible task, but what people can do is try to recognize when grievances are being caused by others or even themselves. Sorting out whether something is rational or groupthink may come down to an individual to decide for his or herself. Although, even if approved ethics are applied, the results are open to interpretation. Truly knowing and understanding a group or ideology may oftentimes be impossible, because if we all understood each other's motivations, passions and convictions then there would be much more empathy in the world. Groupthink can be caused by this lack of understanding; social compliance takes the burden off the

individual and dilutes important communication between people/factions. Recognizing whether actions are justified rationally is extremely complex, but at least having the conversation is something that is very important for a productive society.

### References

"What Is Groupthink." What Is Groupthink. Psychologists for Social Responsibility, n.d. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

Cook, Karen. "Groupthink." The Theory of Applied to Nanking. Stanford, n.d. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

Booker, Christopher. "Sinister Groupthink Powers the Modern World." The Telegraph. Telegraph Media Group, 24 May 2014. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

Grant, S. "Top 10 Instances Of Mob Mentality - Listverse." Listverse. N.p., 20 July 2014. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

@SocialPsyQ. "The Salem Witch Trials: Groupthink at Its Worst." Social PsyQ. N.p., 31 Oct. 2014. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

Rieff, David. "The Unwisdom of Crowds." New Republic. N.p., 06 Sept. 2010. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

Cain, Susan. "The Rise of the New Groupthink." The New York Times. The New York Times, 14 Jan. 2012. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

University, Santa Clara. "Ethical Decision Making." - Ethics Resources. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Sept. 2016.

Hoffer, Eric. The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements. N.p.: HarperCollins, 1951. Kindle.

Bagshaw, Mike. "Is Diversity Divisive? A Positive Training Approach." Academia.edu. N.p., 2004. Web. 13 Oct. 2016.

Lunenburg, Fred C. "Group Decision Making: The Potential for Groupthink." INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT, BUSINESS, AND ADMINISTRATION 13 (2010): 1-6. Web. 11 Oct. 2016.

Kent, Michael L. "Public Relations Rhetoric: Criticism, Dialogue, and the Long Now." Management Communication Quarterly. Sage Journals, 19 May 2011. Web. 12 Oct. 2016.