

Research and Analysis: A Look into Conformity and Groupthink

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Abstract

Research shows that the Bystander Effect is a social influence that contributes to groupthink and conformity. However, the idea that the majority of individuals are affected by this effect is something to look deeper into when studying this subject. Groupthink and conformity have harmed individuals in the past during times of homicide, kidnappings, and sometimes even personal relationships with others. This then leads to the idea that likability and wanting to be accepted are to blame for conformity and groupthink. It is true that peer pressure is a real issue, and it is all in the name of preserving oneself in society by ensuring that the individual is not the odd man out. Part of human nature includes preserving the species, and it is hardwired in most, if not all, living things to preserve the population and race through safety in numbers. After all, a species was not saved by just one individual, but by multiple. Perhaps it is this fear of singularity that causes conformity and groupthink. The innate desire for preservation might be partly to blame for these effects on human interaction. However, when it comes to times of need, groupthink and conformity can be quite damaging.

Groupthink

For this portion of the study, I formed a group of 5 people to participate in a personal study that was centered around the concept of groupthink. As stated by Keebler (2015), “groupthink is a consequence that occurs when significant pressure to conform to group norms exists. A groupthink environment stifles creativity and impedes the free flow of information that may be of significant importance to the success of the organization.” (p.93). In this case, the quiz is the factor that puts a light pressure on the participants to respond a certain way to receive a desirable grade. The word “quiz” invokes this feeling of wanting to strive for the right answer.

For this experiment, I asked all 5 participants to take a basic quiz that I had designed. Of the 5 participants, 4 were family members, and the one participant remaining was a friend of mine who knew little of my family’s personal lives. To test groupthink, I decided to fashion the quiz in a way that would ask random questions that had something to do with every single person taking the quiz, but all participants did not know that the question was referring to them. For example, John^{*1} is fascinated with history. One of the questions asked, “The past is something to be learned from. True or false?” Without mentioning history directly, this statement still appealed to John since history pertains to the past and learning facts about the past is something John loves to do. The chances of John answering “True” was very likely. The remaining questions on the quiz were similar for everyone taking the quiz since the answers were relatively easy to guess based on my knowing each individual.

The quiz consisted of 10 questions, 2 of which were in favor of each participant’s interests and beliefs. At the end of the quiz, I asked everyone to discuss

¹ All names with a “*” next to it are substitute names of the participants to maintain privacy

their answers with one another and come to a unanimous decision for each question. The discussion could not be concluded until all participants settled upon an answer for all 10 questions. Once they reached a decision, I would record their answers. The results were highly interesting.

For scoring, I designed it as such: All participants start with a 100% regardless of their answer. I would walk around the room and record each response that each participant marked. There was no right or wrong answer unbeknownst to them. As stated by Allan (2021):

Does Janis suggest ways of preventing groupthink? Yes, he does. These include that the leader should not express an opinion when assigning the task, there should be a critical evaluator, outside experts should be invited to meetings, and that someone should be assigned the job of playing devil's advocate.

I did not express any opinion during the process, and the critical evaluator as well as devil's advocate were present when the unanimous decision was reached.

Once completed, I would then deduct 10% for each question that was changed based on the group consensus. For example, if Lily* originally answered that it was true that humans change constantly throughout their lives and that we never fully "arrive" to a perfect status, but the group convinced her that it is debatable and that "practice makes perfect," her changed answer would bring her down to a 90%. She changed her answer due to the influence of the group. The participants received the following scores: John 80%, Lily 90%, Sarah* 100%, Sam*90%, William* 60%. I took the average of these scores and concluded that 84% of the answers were not influenced by groupthink but that 16% were. The answers were changeable because of the pressure to agree with one another, and the effects of groupthink were at work. Below is a chart to illustrate this change due to groupthink:

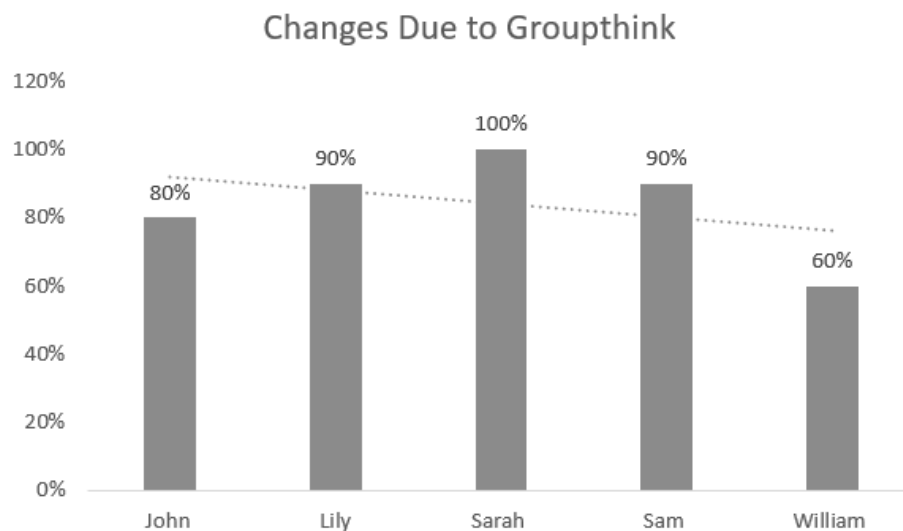


Figure 1

Sarah*, who was not a family member, surprisingly was not affected by groupthink as much as the other participants who knew each other well. She spoke up for many of her answers and came up with arguments as to why it was the correct answer. On the other hand, some of the other participants easily changed their answers without much pushback. This shows how personality and staying detached from personal details can change an individual's response to groupthink. The situation was handled better when Sarah decided to speak up and unemotionally argue her point. She was not influenced by the details of the family since, to her, there was no right answer. To the other participants, I asked if any of them originally answered a certain way, knowing that their counterparts were likely to choose the same answer. 3 out of 4 family members said, "Yes." Unsurprisingly, Sarah did not have such pressure since she was detached from the details of the family's inclinations. In the end, Sarah was the only participant whose answers were unchanged regardless of her not knowing what the other participants would answer.

This illustrated the power of groupthink, especially when it comes to familiarity and a desire to be agreeable. With family, these components are strong. This could be applied to friend groups as well as any other group that requires unity of thoughts and beliefs. As stated by Valine (2018):

A group is especially vulnerable to Groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions and when there are no clear rules for decision making. Janis concluded that when certain conditions exist in a group, then there is a reasonable chance that Groupthink will happen. (p. 301)

The outlier in my sample was Sarah, who was not subject to a similar background as the remaining 4 participants were. Therefore, the effects of groupthink were higher in family members than in Sarah.

Conformity

For this concept, I created another activity. This time, I asked 4 friends of mine, 2 of whom knew each other well while the other 2 did not, to watch a short film from my childhood. The 2 friends who knew each other well were present during the time when the recording was first made. The other 2 friends were not aware of what the subject of the recording was. The recording I showed them was of my 10th birthday party.

I separated my friends into two groups: The two who knew each other and were present in the recording were in one group (Group 1: Jennifer and Rose), and the 2 remaining friends were in their own group (Group 2: Lily and Sam). I asked Group 1 to first recall the details of the color of the balloons as well as the cake at the party without seeing the video yet. Jennifer remembered red and blue balloons as well as a vanilla cake with sprinkles. Rose recalled pink and gold balloons as well as an undefined flavor of cake with sprinkles.

For the other group, I waited to ask questions until after I had them view the video. Once they saw it, I asked them to recall the same details as Group 1. I then brought them together into one group again and asked them to discuss the details with each other. Since Group 1 knew that Group 2 had freshly seen the details, I

wanted to see if they would change their answers since Group 1 was merely answering from their memories of the occasion.

Group 1's answers changed due to Group 2's answers. After discussing these simple details, both groups decided that the balloons were rose gold and silver, and the cake was indeed vanilla with sprinkles. I played the video for them again, and to their surprise, everyone had given an incorrect answer. The color of the balloons was correct. However, their collective memory of the cake was inaccurate. I had cupcakes at my birthday party instead. The flavor of the cake was cherry chip, and it was decorated with cherry frosting and sprinkles.

There were many details in conflict when it came to their decision. Group 1 decided that the cake was vanilla. Because Group 2 understood that Group 1 must know what the flavor was since they were there at the party, they confidently decided to collectively agree on vanilla, abandoning the concept of cupcakes, pink frosting, and a brief mention of cherry flavored mix in the recording altogether. However, since Group 1 knew that Group 2 just saw the video, they then collectively agreed on the color of balloons. When I asked how they could have missed the fact that I had cupcakes at my party instead of a cake, they mentioned that my question of "What type of cake did I have at my party?" threw them off. I did this on purpose to see if they would blindly follow a suggestion or if they would recall/pay attention to the details of the video.

This scenario illustrates conformity. Because both groups had a chance to recall the correct information but didn't because of the memory of other individuals, this caused the confusion of details. As stated by Çapan, et.al. (2022):

The memory conformity effect occurs when two people discuss an event together and incorporate the details in each other's memory reports into their own. Investigation of the memory conformity effect is essential because people naturally share their memories with others, and most of the time, they are convinced of the accuracy of their memory reports. (p.1)

This was perfectly demonstrated by the mismatch of details that were fully believed to be the accurate representation of the party. In a professional investigation, this would have been misleading when trying to obtain accurate information. As stated by Kękus, et.al (2021), "One of the many possible sources of erroneous testimony is the memory conformity effect...which occurs when a person witnesses a criminal event and then talks about it with another witness, thus affecting the memory account of the second witness..." These are the effects that conformity has on individuals who may have been part of a situation or may have merely observed a specific occurrence.

Summary

Both groupthink and conformity are powerful when it comes to influencing individuals and how they respond when considering others' opinions. The main takeaway, however, is personality and staying emotionally detached from certain groups can help mitigate the effects of these influences. However, it appears that conformity is arguably more influential than groupthink. Groupthink requires a desire to be agreeable with specific individuals as well as having details in common

with one another. On the other hand, conformity requires a memory of an occurrence and another's recollection of the same occurrence. Because the first triggers a desire to be accepted and the other creates an insecurity about unstable information, the second will always win when it comes to memory recall and the input of another's recollection.

References

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