

## GROUP DISCUSSION EFFECTS ON CONFLICT BEHAVIOR AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Although most social conflicts involve opposing groups of people, experimental research on conflict behavior has almost exclusively utilized individual participants. The present research compared the conflict behavior of individuals and groups using an expanded prisoner's dilemma matrix cast in the language of an economic (gas war) simulation. There was no difference in the conflict behavior of individual and group players, both being highly noncooperative. But on post-experimental scales assessing subjects' evaluations of their own and opponent's behavior, individuals tended to justify their own behavior and groups were even more inclined toward self-justification. This result confirms the group polarization hypothesis and supports the contention of Janis (1972) that in situations of intergroup conflict, intragroup communication is likely to strengthen the group's perception of the inherent morality of its actions.

Experimental research on conflict behavior has almost exclusively utilized individual subjects (see Vinacke, 1969). Yet in reality, most social conflicts involve opposing *groups* of individuals (sometimes political systems or organizations represented by a smaller governing group or negotiating team). It is thus of interest to compare the conflict behavior of groups with that of individuals. As Frank (1967) notes, "national leaders . . . make decisions as individuals or members of small policy-making committees. Therefore, an adequate analysis of the causes of war and peace must include an understanding of psychological factors influencing the behavior of people when they function as individuals or in small groups" (p. 6).

The first purpose of the present research was therefore to compare the behavior of individuals in a conflict game with the behavior of small groups. There are various plausible hypotheses about the effect of group interaction on conflict behavior. Perhaps the behavior of the group will approximate the average inclination of its individual members. Or perhaps, as in some problem-solving situations (Collins & Guetzkow, 1964), groups will exhibit rational superiority, i.e., greater cooperativeness than the individuals. A third possibility is suggested by recent research on group-induced response polarization (see Myers & Lamm, in press). Group discussion may enhance the initially dominant inclinations of group members, leading groups to be less cooperative in situations where individuals already tend toward noncooperation and to be more cooperative in situations where individuals are inclined to cooperate.

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A second purpose of the experiment was to investigate the effect of intra-group communication on attitudes toward one's own and the opponent's behavior. In a post-experimental questionnaire subjects evaluated the behavior and motives of themselves and of their opponent. We expected that individual players would evaluate themselves more positively than their opponent. The group polarization hypothesis predicts that the group condition will increase any tendency of individuals to perceive themselves as morally superior.

#### METHOD

##### *Subjects*

The subjects were introductory psychology students who participated for a small amount of extra credit. Up to 15 persons signed up for a given experimental session. Depending on the number who actually attended, one or two pairs of groups and one or two pairs of individuals were randomly composed to form two or three pairs of players in a conflict simulation. There resulted 28 groups (14 pairs) of three to five persons each and 34 individuals (17 pairs). The subjects knew they were paired with another player, but did not know that groups always interacted with another group and an individual was paired with another individual.

##### *Facilities*

Subjects reported to a classroom where they were introduced to the procedure and then assigned to rooms. The experiment was conducted in a social psychology laboratory which included six individual rooms surrounding a control center. Each player, whether individual or group, was assigned to a separate room. The control center where the experimenter was stationed could communicate with all rooms simultaneously or engage in two-way communication with any individual room. Thus, it was possible to summarize instructions to all players at once (equating the treatment of individuals and groups) and to receive information and give feedback to each player concerning the outcomes of each trial.

##### *Procedure*

An expanded prisoner's dilemma matrix cast in the language of a business simulation was created for the experiment. Each subject was introduced to the simulation by the payoff matrix presented in Fig. 1. This was explained and illustrated without reference to "game," "conflict," or "opponent." The experimenter explained that independent gas stations were going to be formed, some of which would be run by individual managers and some by managers in cooperation with their fellow shareholders.

Here is how it works. Pretend that it is some time in the future when gas supplies are again more plentiful so that prices tend to vary from place to place and from time to time. Your station is located in a small town and right across the street from you is an-

other independent station. You are the only two stations within a reasonable distance so the people in your area will buy their gas from one of the two of you.

Each morning when you both open at 7 a.m. you will both have already fixed your gas price for the day on your pumps and you must then post that price and stick with it for the rest of the day. How much profit you make in a given day depends both on what price you decide upon and what price the other station decides upon. If you will look at the payoff matrix, I will explain this with a few examples.

First note that if you both post the same price you both receive the same income for that day. This is because you split the business equally, since your gas and service are of comparable quality. For example, if you both decide upon 41¢ then you both gain three profit units for that day, as the matrix indicates. The simulation will extend over a number of independent days. At the end of the exercise you will sum your profit units for all the days and I will then give you one cent for every economic unit your station has profited. . . . If you are in the group management condition, that does not mean you will have to split the profit. Rather you will *each* receive the profit computed since you are equal shareholders.

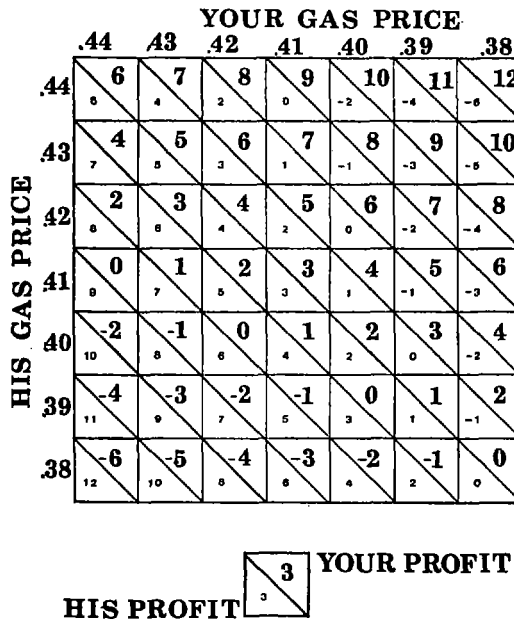


FIG. 1. Payoff matrix

Subsequent instructions explained the matrix with examples. For example, a price structure of 38/44¢ would result in a loss of six profit units for the high price station ("because he got no business but had to pay his overhead") while the lower price station would gain 12 units because it would more than make up in increased volume what it lost in per gallon profit margin.

It was explained that each station would have one or two minutes to decide on its price at the beginning of each "day" (trial) and that the experimenter would then call for this decision over the intercom. After receiving all price information he would then give each station feedback on the price of the station with which it was paired. The feedback about the other station's decisions was always truthful, not contrived. In the group condition, the manager (who had final say in case of disagreement) was chosen by lot. (Most discussions appeared to result in a consensus decision.)

After you receive the feedback you should all look up on the matrix the number of profit units which you and the other station gained for that day and record this on your record sheet. Every person should do this, including those in the group condition who are advising the managers, since this is the sheet you will turn in at the end of the hour for your cash reimbursement.

The experiment continued for 20 trials ("days"). The actual interval between decisions averaged about two minutes. Since individual and group treatments occurred simultaneously, any subtle variation in the procedure was equivalent for both conditions.

At the end of the simulation, individuals and groups were asked to describe their own station and the station with which they interacted on three semantic differential scales: fair-unfair, uncooperative-cooperative, and trustworthy-untrustworthy. Everyone then was brought together in the control center for reimbursement, debriefing, and discussion. Subjects were urged to maintain secrecy until the completion of the experiment.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Conflict Behavior*

As can be seen in Fig. 2, individual participants were predominantly inclined toward noncooperation (low, competitive prices) during the first five trials and this tendency maintained itself throughout the experiment. It may also be noted that decisions in the group condition closely approximated those by individuals. There was no significant difference (by *t* tests) in mean price decisions by groups and individuals over all 20 trials or for any of the four trial blocks. Thus, groups were not significantly more cooperative than individuals nor were they significantly more polarized (competitive). It should be acknowledged, however, that individual decisions were already close to the ceiling in competitiveness, so the experiment did not allow a sensitive search for group polarization processes in conflict situations.

### *Perceptions of Self and Opponent*

The three semantic differential scores obtained from individuals and groups were averaged and converted to a  $-3$  to  $+3$  continuum for ease of interpreta-

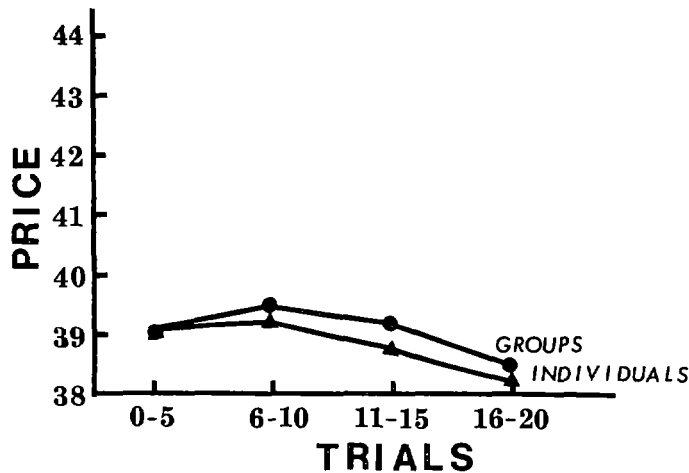


FIG. 2. Mean price decisions by individuals and groups

tion. Table 1 indicates that individuals did indeed tend to evaluate their own behaviors and motives more favorably than that of their opponent.

Consistent with the hypothesis of group polarization, Table 1 shows that in the group condition there was an even greater tendency to evaluate oneself as superior to the opponent. But this group vs individual trend did not reach significance. Looking just at the evaluation of one's own station, groups did, however, evaluate themselves significantly more positively than did individuals ( $t = 2.13$ ,  $df = 60$ ,  $p < .05$ ). An analysis of covariance (controlling for any effect of actual differences in cooperativeness) confirmed this result.

TABLE 1  
PERCEPTION OF OWN STATION AND OTHER STATION BY INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

Condition	N	Own Station	Other Station	Diff.	<i>p</i>
Individual	34	.81	.03	.78	<.01
Group	28	1.54	-.09	1.63	<.001

Note.—Scores could range from  $-3$  (negative) to  $+3$  (positive).

The data therefore suggest that any tendency for intragroup communication to exaggerate perceived ingroup vs outgroup differences may largely result from greater self-justification by groups as compared to individuals. These results experimentally confirm the speculation of Janis (1972) that in situations of intergroup conflict, "groupthink" dynamics can produce a strengthened "belief in the group's inherent morality."

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