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The Polarizing Effect of Group Discussion

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The discovery that discussion tends to enhance the average prediscussion tendency has stimulated new insights about the nature of group influence

Various opinions have long existed about whether group interaction tends to have mostly beneficial or mostly destructive outcomes. Some social observers have seen the destructive outcomes—for example, extremist movements arising from isolated subcultures. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) ascribed the “inferiority of the morality of groups” to “the revelation of a collective egoism, compounded of the egoistic impulses of individuals, which achieve a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when they are united in a common impulse than when they express themselves separately and discretely” (p. xii). James Coleman (1957) concluded from his analyses of opinion polarization during community conflict that “group discus-

sion . . . is such an important phenomenon in community controversies that in the case studies examined most descriptions of behavior during the intense part of the controversy were descriptions of discussion and of attempts to persuade or reinforce opinion” (p. 18).

Others, however, have noted seemingly beneficial outcomes of group interaction. Minority persons seeking to build cultural consciousness have been encouraged to group with similar others to strengthen ethnic identity. Followers of religious movements have likewise been advised to “yoke” themselves in fellowship with brothers in the faith in order to mutually strengthen their shared convictions. Thomas à Kempis advised that “a devout communing on spiritual things sometimes greatly helps the health of the soul, especially when men of one mind and spirit in God meet and speak and commune together.”

Research in experimental social psychology has recently helped clarify our understanding of the effects of talking in small groups. A generalization which may help explain both the apparently destructive and beneficial outcomes has emerged: group discussion tends to enhance the average pregroup inclination of the group members.

Origin of the concept

The research literature of more than 300 studies originated in a surprising discovery by James Stoner in 1961. For his master's thesis in industrial management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stoner decided to compare risk-taking by individuals

and groups. He wanted to test the old adage that groups are more cautious and less creatively daring than individuals. His procedure is worth describing because it has been followed in dozens of later experiments.

A small number of participants—usually about five—are scheduled for a given session. After arriving at the laboratory they first individually respond to a series of story problems, here called dilemma situations. Each problem describes a decision faced by a fictional character. The participant's task is to advise the protagonist how much risk he should take. The following sample problem illustrates the task.

Henry is a writer who is said to have considerable creative talent but who so far has been earning a comfortable living by writing cheap Westerns. Recently he has come up with an idea for a potentially significant novel. If it could be written and accepted, it might have considerable literary impact and be a big boost to his career. On the other hand, if he was not able to work out his idea or if the novel was a flop, he would have expended considerable time and energy without remuneration.

Participants are then asked to check the *lowest* probability of success, on a scale of 10, that they would consider acceptable for Henry to attempt to write the novel.

After individually marking their advice on all the items, the participants then assemble as a group and discuss each item until they agree. The finding that groups were on the whole more risk-prone than the average individual member was immediately dubbed the “risk-shift”

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phenomenon, and it was followed by a wave of investigations of group risk taking. These subsequent studies have taken place in a dozen different nations, indicating that Stoner's results are not peculiar to MIT graduate students. They also reveal that group decision-making is not an essential component of the procedure; a brief period of discussion followed by individual decision-making will also produce a shift in the group average.

This interest in the risk shift was stimulated not by any great magnitude of the group change—the average shift was only about one scale unit or less—but rather because the reliable effect was unexpected and its cause was not obvious. A lively controversy developed over what was producing the shift. Here was a new puzzle for social psychologists. As always, it was hoped that the solution might yield some important new understandings about human behavior in social situations. Does discussion in juries, in business committees, and in military decision groups generally increase risk-taking?

After about five years of research and speculation on the great risk-proneness of human groups, it became evident that the risk shift was not as general as first thought. For example, some dilemmas did not yield a reliable risk shift, and some items were found to yield reliable shifts to greater caution after discussion. One such dilemma follows (written in 1962):

Roger, a married man with two children of school age, has a secure job that pays him about \$6,000 per year. He can easily afford the necessities of life, but few of the luxuries. Except for a life insurance policy he has no savings. Roger has heard from reliable sources that the stock of a relatively unknown Company X might triple its present value if a new product currently in production is favorably received by the buying public. On the other hand, if the product is unfavorably received, the stock might decline considerably in value. Roger is considering investing his life insurance money in this company.

Again, the subjects were asked to imagine that they were advising Roger to check the *lowest* probability of success, on a scale of 10, that they would consider acceptable be-

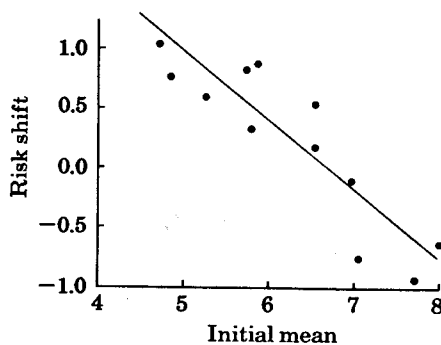


Figure 1. The mean risk shift on a dilemma item is found to be a linear function of the mean of the initial degree of risk-taking selected on a scale of 1 to 10. Items which elicit high-risk initial tendencies (for example 4 in 10) generally elicit shift toward the high-risk extreme after discussion. Items with low-risk initial means (for example 8 in 10) are more likely to elicit shift toward the low-risk extremes. Correlation = .89 across 12 items. (From Myers and Arenson 1972.)

fore Roger should invest in Company X stock.

The first situation, about Henry the writer, yields consistent risk shift after group discussion, whereas this second one yields consistent increases in caution after group discussion. Is there any general principle that will allow us to predict in advance the likely direction of shift?

Fortunately, an excellent predictor exists. These problems differ not only in whether they elicit group shift toward the risky or cautious ends of the scale, but also in the average of the initial prediscussion responses. Chances are that the reader would advise greater risk to Henry than to Roger, even without any discussion with others. As Figure 1 illustrates, there turns out to be a strong relationship between the average initial response on an item and the average shift elicited by that item. In general, items which usually elicit risk shift will have an initial response average around 5 in 10 or less (as with Henry), and items which elicit a shift toward caution will have an initial response average around 7 in 10 or higher (as with Roger). We therefore see that what the research with dilemmas indicates is not a consistent risk-shift tendency, as was originally assumed, but rather a tendency for group discussion to enhance the initially dominant point of view.

The group-change effect discovered on dilemmas is therefore better described as a *group-polarization* phenomenon: the average postdiscussion response will tend to be more extreme in the same direction as the average of the pregroup responses. (The term "group polarization" originates from the work of Serge Moscovici and his colleagues in Paris.)

Validity of group polarization

Viewing the shifts as a group-polarization phenomenon rather than a risk-taking phenomenon stimulates us to see whether the effect might generalize to other, nonrisk, dimensions. There are now several dozen such studies, and they do for the most part confirm the validity of the group-polarization generalization (see Myers and Lamm, in press, for a comprehensive review). Two research strategies have been used in these studies. In the first procedure, people discuss topics on which they are generally predisposed to feel pro or con. Then it is determined whether talking in groups tends to enhance this dominant leaning (just as the dilemmas have elicited risky or cautious initial reactions and corresponding shift tendencies). The general prediction for these experiments is intensification of the initial average position.

In the first reported studies of group polarization, Serge Moscovici and Marisa Zavalloni (1969) observed that French students' initially positive attitudes toward de Gaulle and negative attitudes toward Americans were strengthened during discussion. And Willem Doise (1969) found that discussion enhanced the negative attitudes which French architectural students had toward their school.

David Myers and Martin Kaplan (1975) experimented with group-induced change in a simulated jury setting. As H. J. Kalven and H. Ziesel (1966) concluded, "The [jury] deliberation process . . . is an interesting combination of rational persuasion, sheer social pressure, and the psychological mechanism by which individual perceptions undergo change when exposed to

group discussion" (p. 489). Do decisions following jury deliberation differ in any predictable way from the average of the predeliberation opinions of individual jury members? Participants discussed traffic cases which elicited a dominant predisposition of either guilty or not guilty. Table 1 indicates that when the defendants were made to appear low in guilt, the jurors, after discussion, were even more definite in their judgments of innocence and more lenient in their recommended punishments. After discussing high-guilt cases, the participants polarized toward harsher judgments of guilt and punishment.

The generalization of these findings to actual juries is, of course, only suggestive, since the experiment involved very brief deliberation in a less realistic atmosphere than that of an actual court setting. But there is some reason to believe that group-enhancement processes may be operating in real court settings as well. Thomas Walker and Eleanor Main (1973) compared decisions related to civil liberties made by individual federal district court judges to decisions in similar cases made by three-judge panels. Group decisions produced a much higher proportion of libertarian decisions than did judges deciding individually, a finding Walker and Main attributed to the pre-existing private values of the judges.

Helmut Lamm and Claudius Sauer (1974) observed polarization in a bargaining situation that involved real consequences. When an individual was asked to distribute 18 profit units between himself and another participant, the average individual initially proposed giving 64% to himself. After discussing his position with other persons he was not competing against, the average demand was raised to almost 70%. Perhaps this could be considered an experimental demonstration of Niebuhr's "collective egoism."

Group discussion also helps shape our perceptions of other people—take gossip, for example. To see if conversation could have a polarizing effect on discussants who share a mutual feeling, Myers (in press) used a faculty evaluation task. Participants responded to 200-word descriptions of fictional

Table 1. Mean of initial, final, and shift scores for discussed and undiscussed items in a jury study

Variable	N	Discussed items			Undiscussed items		
		Initial	Final	Shift	Initial	Final	Shift
Innocence-guilt (0 to 20)							
Low-guilt cases	60	6.03	4.70	1.33*	6.17	6.27	-0.11
High-guilt cases	60	12.56	14.80	-2.23*	12.27	12.61	-0.38
Punishment (1 to 7)							
Low-guilt cases	60	2.41	1.83	0.58*	2.28	2.32	-0.03
High-guilt cases	60	4.34	4.67	-0.33†	4.17	4.18	-0.01

* $p < .001$ † $p < .10$

"good" and "bad" faculty members by individually stating an attitude judgment and by distributing a pay-increase budget among them. As predicted by the group-polarization hypothesis, "good" faculty were rated and paid even more favorably after the group discussion, and the contrary was true for the "bad" faculty.

Finally, we have also taken a second look at some previous studies of group risk-taking which used risk tasks other than dilemmas. It turns out that the group-polarization hypothesis fits quite well here, too. If a betting situation is constructed that initially induces individuals to take large gambles (e.g. when there is little at stake), then groups generally take even larger gambles. But if the initial tendency is to bet cautiously, the caution usually becomes strengthened by the group. For example, Clark McCauley and his associates (1973) observed at a Philadelphia race track that individuals generally preferred the horses with good odds (the favorites) and avoided betting the long shots. He then formed small groups of these Saturday-afternoon bettors and offered them money to bet as a group. In groups they bet even more cautiously than they did as individuals.

Collectively, the results of these and other experiments in our laboratories and elsewhere indicate that the group-polarization hypothesis does have external validity on measures other than those used to derive the hypothesis in the first place. Response tendencies generally favored by the subject population tend to be strengthened by group interaction.

A second set of experiments has explored group polarization using a different strategy. Instead of introducing topics that elicit a dominant initial tendency toward one pole or the other, this procedure brings together groups of people who share a common inclination toward the discussion materials. Their average shift may then be compared with that of other groups of people who share the opposite tendency. The group-polarization hypothesis predicts that discussion with similarly minded other people will increase the attitude gap between the two groups.

For example, Myers and George Bishop (1970) composed groups of relatively high-, medium-, or low-prejudice high school seniors using a measure of racial attitudes. Group members then responded to eight new items involving racial attitudes (e.g. federal vs. local control of desegregation) before and after discussion. The discussion with others having similar racial attitudes significantly increased the gap between the high- and low-prejudice groups. There is ample evidence that people tend to associate mostly with others who have similar attitudes and values. Most of us need only to look at our friends to demonstrate this point. Does separation on the basis of shared values generally produce increased polarization between groups? This is an important question.

Other experiments using the procedure of separation into groups on the basis of shared attitudes have yielded only mixed support for the group-polarization hypothesis. Myers and Paul Bach (1974) separated relatively pacifistic and rela-

tively militaristic students into two groups—doves and hawks. It was predicted that discussion of relevant materials within the two homogeneous “communities” would increase the polarization between them. In fact, however, both the hawks and doves increased in pacifism after discussion. Other evidence is more supportive. For example, Myers (in press) used a measure of sex-role attitudes to separate subjects into conservative (“chauvinist”) and liberal (“feminist”) populations. As predicted, discussing statements about the role of women—e.g. “women with children should not work outside the home if they don’t have to financially”—increased the attitude gap between the two groups. This outcome resulted from an increase in liberalism in the already liberal feminist population—a demonstration of “consciousness-raising” through discussion among the like-minded.

Field observations of social polarization appear consistent with the laboratory studies of intergroup polarization. Coleman (1957) has surmised that homogeneous grouping is a source of community polarization and that the occurrence of social conflict further heightens “the proliferation of associations among those who feel one way, and the attenuation of association between those who feel differently. One’s statements meet more and more with a positive response; one is more and more free to express the full intensity of his feeling” (p. 14).

More recently the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest (1970) concluded that the radical student movement “had its own culture, its solidarity, and its sense of being set apart from and against the outside society. It thus could easily interpret any event and any issue in ways that would contribute to the strengthening of the movement rather than to its weakening” (p. 85).

Another real-life demonstration of this group-polarization tendency comes from research summarized by K. A. Feldman and T. Newcomb (1969) on student change during college. “Initial differences among students in different colleges and in different curricula are ac-

centuated or amplified as students progress through college. Instances of this same phenomenon also occur with respect to initial differences among students entering different types of residences” (p. 209). For example, the tendency for fraternity members to be more conservative and prejudiced than independents tends to be smallest at the freshman and sophomore levels and largest at the senior level. Feldman and Newcomb surmise that this may be the case partly because “the reciprocal influences of members on one another reinforce and strengthen extant orientations” (p. 223). The likelihood that this type of communication effect will take place is one of the reasons Thomas Pettigrew (1969) has argued so strongly that increased racial separation is antithetical to racial reconciliation.

To summarize, it is now clear that the effect of group discussion which Stoner uncovered on the dilemma items is indeed not a risk-shift effect but rather a group-polarization tendency that may be demonstrated in a wide variety of situations. Our next task is to understand what is causing the phenomenon.

Theoretical explanations

An adequate theoretical explanation of group polarization will serve the functions of any good theory in the social sciences: it will account for the known conditions under which group polarization occurs, and it will also predict the effects of other conditions not yet studied and suggest when group polarization is *not* to be expected. This predictive function allows us to test the truth of the theory, and it may suggest some useful applications.

By now the reader may have formed his own explanations of group polarization. One idea often suggested is the role of leadership dynamics. Someone probably emerges as the most forceful group member, and he may sway the others to his point of view. Although this was one of the first explanations seriously advanced by social psychologists who studied the phenomenon, it will not explain the results. For example, while it is indeed true that some members of

the group emerge as stronger leaders than others, an additional assumption is required to explain group polarization—namely, that those who emerge as leaders are also more extreme in the dominant direction than their fellow group members. Yet data show that there is no relationship between the extremity of a person and the extent to which he dominates the discussion (Myers and Murdoch 1970). As we shall see, it is still possible that relatively extreme *positions* will tend to be more persuasive than neutral positions.

Other very sensible ideas have also been discounted (see Myers 1973). For example, polarization is not simply the result of becoming more familiar with the materials: private study of the items does not yield the same effect as discussion. The effect is also not the result of a “majority-rule” decision process, whereby deviant minorities are pressured into agreement with the dominant group. This is evidenced by the fact that there is not only a polarization of the group’s arithmetic average score but also of its median (middle) score. The middle group member is, of course, a member of the majority.

Two theories for which some support does exist are the *interpersonal comparison* explanation and the *informational influence* explanation. The first stresses our social character and the second stresses our rational capacities.

The interpersonal comparison theory assumes that people desire to perceive and present themselves favorably in relation to others. Exposure to others’ positions may therefore stimulate a person to adjust his response so as to maintain a desirable self-perception. More specifically, a person is presumed to shift his response when he discovers that others share his inclinations more than he would have supposed, either because the group norm turns out to be more in line with his own preferences than he previously imagined or because he feels released to act out more strongly his preference after observing someone else who models it more extremely than himself (see Pruitt 1971a, b). This latter idea, called “release theory,” is consistent with conformity

studies which indicate that the example of only one person freely deviating from an imposed norm can liberate other individuals to act out their own impulses. It also fits with the finding that we tend to admire as most sincere and competent those persons who are on our side of an issue but who are more extreme (Eisenger and Mills 1968) and with field observations indicating that in ideological groups extreme views and extremist members wield disproportionate influence (see, for example, the President's Commission on Campus Unrest 1970; Raack 1970). If there is any commonality in the sources of polarization in small laboratory groups and in large crowds and mobs, it probably lies in the contribution of social-emotional forces to both. For example, release theory is compatible with observations of the contagion effects of actions by "trigger persons" in crowds of people who share a common impulse.

There is an implicit assumption here that the person enters the discussion misperceiving the likely positions of his fellow group members. There are now many studies that have asked participants, after they have responded to dilemma items, to go back over the items and guess how their *average* peer would respond and then go back over the items a third time and indicate what response they would actually admire the most. Typically, the person estimates that the group norm is more neutral than his own initial response and that his ideal is more extreme. It seems that we generally like to perceive ourselves as more in the socially preferred direction than those with whom we compare ourselves. For example, most businessmen believe themselves to be more ethical than the average businessman (Baumhart 1968), and there is evidence that people perceive their own views as less prejudiced than the norm of their community (Lenihan 1965).

Because the interpersonal-comparison explanation assumes that the exchange of arguments in discussion is of no consequence, one way to test this theory is to examine its prediction that mere exposure to others' responses is sufficient to produce the effect. In a recent experiment, Myers, Bach, and Barry

Schreiber (1974) had people respond to three Henry-type dilemma items after being informed of the distribution of responses by 40 other people in a control condition. Surprisingly, their responses were more polarized than the average of the control responses they had been given—the opposite of conformity! The participants were fairly accurate in their guess of the average of the control responses, and yet this knowledge elicited a *deviation* (polarization) from the observed norm.

Evidently there are situations in which people seek to be not average but better than average. The reader can probably recall group situations in which people were surprised to discover that others shared their secret feelings and were then stimulated to express increasingly extreme views in the valued direction. As Roger Brown (1974) notes, "To be virtuous, in any of an indefinite number of situations, is to be different from the mean—in the right direction and to the right degree" (p. 469).

The informational influence theory, which has been even more consistently supported, suggests that, during discussion, arguments are generated which predominantly favor the initially preferred alternative. These arguments can include some persuasive points the typical person has not previously considered. For example, in discussing Henry someone may point out that Henry has little to lose since he can always go back to writing cheap Westerns. This thought may be compelling to other group members who have not entertained it before. What people learn from the discussion is mostly in the direction supporting the majority's initial preference (the average initial leaning being simply a reflection of the prevailing direction of available arguments).

The experiments which support this theory are of two types. The first type indicates that exchanging arguments produces group polarization even if no mention is made of initial response—in fact, even if clever manipulations are used to keep the subject from learning the actual opinions of the other group members (Burnstein and Vinokur 1973). Studies of political attitudes

in natural situations also indicate that increased information tends to polarize opinion (Sears 1969).

The second type of relevant evidence looks inside the "black box" of discussion to examine the arguments which are actually expressed. Amiram Vinokur and Eugene Burnstein (1974) and Bishop and Myers (1974) have proposed models which assume that the amount of group shift will be determined by three factors: the *direction* of each argument (which side it favors), its *persuasiveness*, or cogency, and its *novelty* (the degree to which the argument is not already known to group members before discussion). The potency of an argument will be low if, being trivial or irrelevant, it lacks persuasiveness or if all group members have considered the argument before discussion. By careful and sophisticated analyses of the discussion content, Vinokur and Burnstein have demonstrated support for their model. For example, the arguments expressed do mostly favor the dominant direction, and these arguments are independently rated as more persuasive than arguments favoring the other alternative.

This theory explains why, on a given item, a group that is already quite extreme before discussion will often not show as much polarization as a less extreme group. Presumably the initially polarized group already shares the most persuasive arguments, whereas the less polarized group has more to learn from exchanging the available arguments. The theory also clearly implies the conditions under which group polarization is to be expected—when discussion generates potent information predominantly in one direction. Although the average initial tendency gives an index to the direction of available arguments and thus generally predicts shift, the initial tendency is not a direct cause of the shift. It is possible to imagine situations in which a known alternative *A* is initially favored over unknown *B*, but shift would be expected toward *B* because the impact of new information in support of *B* would probably be greater than the impact of old arguments for *A*.

But other data reveal that passive

learning about an item is not a complete explanation of the shift effect. Reading or listening to arguments generally produces less effect than actual participation in discussion. This finding is reminiscent of earlier work by Kurt Lewin (1947) on the superiority of group discussion to a lecture in producing behavior change; of more recent educational research indicating that participative discussion has a greater effect than mere information presentation (McKeachie 1968); of experiments demonstrating the impact of active role-playing as contrasted with passive exposure (see Jones and Gerard 1967); and of Thomas Crawford's report (1974) of the minimal impact of passively received sermons on racial tolerance.

Recent theory and research on the nature of human attitudes help clarify why active discussion produces more change than passive receipt of the same information. Anthony Greenwald (1968) has shown that passive learning about the target of an attitude is not sufficient to change the attitude; the subject must actively reformulate, or rehearse, the information he has received in order to internalize an attitude change. Greenwald's finding fits well the spirit of John Dewey's statement: "A thought is not a thought unless it is one's own." It seems quite reasonable to presume that the social confrontation inherent in debate and discussion motivates an active rehearsal process, even in people who are quietly thinking about their next remark.

Another important element of discussion may be the effect of the public verbal *commitments* which the discussants are constantly making. One of the best-documented findings of recent social psychology pertains to the effect of our behavior commitments on our attitudes—our attitudes tend to move toward our behavior. People may feel an increased sense of certainty and conviction after openly committing themselves to the dominant alternative.

We have now seen that two theories—interpersonal comparisons and informational influence—have each received support for their predictions. In real life they do

not function as separate processes: they feed each other. Our expressions of arguments and of a position are often part of the same communication: our arguments may convey information about our position on an issue, and we may select arguments that are biased in the socially desired direction.

Implications of the theory

The ultimate significance of this theory and research can be judged in terms of the actual extent of small-group influence, the possible practical implications, and also the actual experimental results. Writing on the extent of small-group influence on attitudes, William McGuire (1969) concluded: "It is clear that any impact that the mass media have on opinion is less than that produced by informal face-to-face communication of the person with his primary groups, his family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors" (p. 231). We have already noted some possible reasons for the greater effect of face-to-face communication. In social interaction the person is motivated to present himself favorably, and he is engaged in active rehearsal and commitment.

It is therefore not surprising that, in Western culture, group discussion seems increasingly integral to our social and organizational existence. Reliance on individual psychotherapy is being discarded in favor of mutual assistance in small groups. Alcoholics, dieters, and educators are drawing on the presumed power of the group, and group-centered management methods are displacing authoritarian ones. J. M. Rabbie and L. Visser (1972) have also provided a suggestive lead for students of organizational behavior with their finding that the job demands of simulated labor groups polarize following discussion. Pilot studies by Colin Fraser (1974) suggest that care is needed, however, in generalizing group-polarization studies to real decision-making groups.

Returning to our original question of whether group interaction is more destructive or beneficial in its typical outcome, we can now speculate that, if the social and infor-

mational forces likely to be evoked are in the desired direction, then participative management will probably be a useful strategy for producing more "effective" attitudes. If not, the leader can either control the communication content so as to elicit desired arguments (as Kurt Lewin did in some earlier classic experiments on group discussion) or simply introduce the action as a *fait accompli* (as Gordon Allport [1954] noted may sometimes be most effective in initiating desegregation).

Some of the literature cited presents experimental demonstrations of "groupthink" processes which Irving Janis (1972) has proposed to help explain decision fiascoes such as the failure to anticipate the Pearl Harbor attack, the invasions of North Korea and the Bay of Pigs, and the escalation of the Vietnam War. For example, his suggestion that group members "show interest in facts and opinions that support their initially preferred policy and take up time in their meetings to discuss them, but they tend to ignore facts and opinions that do not support their initially preferred policy" (p. 10) is confirmed by a recent finding that discussion arguments more decisively favor the dominant alternative than do written arguments. Janis attributes this bias to a "suppression of deviant thoughts" resulting from "concurrency-seeking as a form of striving for mutual support" in order to "maintain self-esteem" (pp. 201-03).

These experiments both confirm some of the "groupthink" processes proposed by Janis and also suggest additional ways to prevent them. If learning about others' positions has a polarizing effect, then the group leader might suppress mention of initial preferences while eliciting relevant arguments. The finding that verbal arguments are more polarized than individually written briefs suggests the usefulness of generating arguments by individual effort; contrary to the popular myth about the great quantity of ideas produced by group brainstorming, most experiments actually reveal that individual production generates the greatest quantity of ideas from a given group of people (Lamm and Trommsdorff 1973). A.

H. Van de Ven and A. L. Delbecq (1971) offer a practical suggestion for doing this in their "nominal group" technique:

Imagine a meeting room in which seven to ten individuals are sitting around a table in full view of each other. However, they are not speaking to each other. Instead, each individual is writing on a pad of paper in front of him. At the end of 10 to 20 minutes, a very structured sharing of ideas takes place. Each individual, in round-robin fashion, provides one idea from his private list which is written on a flip-chart by a recorder in full view of other members. There is still no discussion, only the recording of privately generated ideas. This round-robin listing continues until each member indicates that he has no further ideas to share. . . . Generally, a spontaneous discussion then follows for a period (in the same fashion as an interactive group meeting) before nominal voting. Nominal voting simply means that the selection of priorities . . . is done by each individual privately, and the group decision is the pooled outcome of the individual votes [p. 204].

The construction of an adequate theory to account for group polarization should suggest not only practical implications but also some new directions for research. For example, interpersonal-comparison theory suggests research which investigates the effects of exposure to others' attitudes on one's own attitudes. The publication of opinion polls is one example of how we receive information about others' positions. The prediction is that a person's attitude may change if and when there is a discrepancy between his perception of the opinions of others with whom he compares himself and his revised perception after he has learned about their actual opinions.

The presentation of models by the mass media also exposes people to others' attitudes. Bigoted TV viewers of "All in the Family" are likely to feel some identification with and affection for Archie Bunker rather than to perceive the satire (see Vidmar and Rokeach 1974); and Thomas Pettigrew (1973) notes that a bigoted viewer observing this extreme model may therefore find his pre-existing inclinations legitimized and henceforth more easily released.

This research on group discussion

demonstrates once again how a program of basic research can generate new knowledge and implications which are impossible to envision in its early stages. It also illustrates the stages by which a psychological research area may develop. An interesting discovery is followed by a rash of generalizations; subsequent research casts doubt on the generality of the original finding, but ultimately there emerges a new and more viable conception of the phenomenon.

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