
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is Groupthink a Real or Perceived Threat? Refocusing on Originality and Diversity Versus Groupthink in Organizational Ecosystems

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ABSTRACT

This review examines the tensions between originality and diversity, and groupthink, in organizational ecosystems. The overarching inquiry is whether groupthink is a real or perceived threat in organizations. The review will determine if the concepts are mutually exclusive or inclusive and how to preserve diversity seemingly when groupthink pressures are evident. This review explores peer-reviewed recent studies focused on originality and diversity, and groupthink, and their pertinent features. The focus of the review includes the description of originality and diversity, and groupthink, the origins of groupthink, how groupthink thwarts originality and diversity, illustrations of groupthink, and how to overcome the groupthink challenge. The review revealed that while groupthink can provide short-term cohesion, it increases the risk of flawed decision-making processes. Besides, originality and diversity, and groupthink, are mutually exclusive. The groupthink challenge is becoming evident in contemporary society and is potentially affecting the quality of public policies. Although diversity and groupthink are mutually exclusive, organizations could promote innovation and creativity through leadership support and the intentional design of team dynamics. Achieving a productive balance between the concepts could reduce the risk of ill-advised decisions. Future research on the cultural, technological, and team evolution related to groupthink is necessary.

| KEYWORDS

Groupthink, originality, diversity, consensus, innovation, leadership, decision-making

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Introductory Overview

The relationship between originality, diversity, and groupthink has garnered significant attention in contemporary organizational behavior research. Originality denotes the generation of novel ideas, while diversity refers to a range of insights derived from different cognitive, experiential, and cultural contexts. Conversely, groupthink is a concurrence-seeking tendency known to impede collective decision-making processes. Multiple studies have revealed that homogenous groups are susceptible to groupthink, leading to flawed decisions due to the lack of innovative ideas and critical discourse (Sastry & Bhat, 2024). Unlike groupthink, which is known for dysfunctional decision-making outcomes, originality and diversity enhance decision-making by fostering critical discussions and introducing varied perspectives.

Combining the Concepts of 'Originality and Diversity' and 'Groupthink'

Although team environments could support effective decision-making, ill-advised decisions could emanate from situations where individuals facilitate group consensus to please others. Enabling group consensus occurs at the expense of thoughtful negotiation, reflection, and debate (Cleary et al., 2019). As indicated in the introduction, the modus operandi of groupthink is consensus and

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not the consideration of alternative actions or views. The concurrence-seeking tendency undermines the pursuit of considered and calculated decisions in organizational ecosystems. Organizations tend to constantly equip their employees to participate constructively in groups and make positively impactful decisions (Narayan et al., 2020). However, this is not possible if they do not appreciate the complexity of the relationship between decision-making, groupthink, cohesiveness, and leadership (Damanik & Wening, 2024). The relationship among these variables affects the dynamics of decision-making in organizations and groups. Reducing the availability of alternative perspectives in a group setting hinders the quality of decisions. Groups experiencing such groupthink are likely to ignore the shortcomings or potential risks in decision options.

Improving decision quality is possible when groups identify and address signs of groupthink. Some of the key signs include the lack of critical judgment or conflict. In pursuit of originality and diversity, organizations require a democratic leadership style that prioritizes the active participation of team members in decision-making processes (Damanik & Wening, 2024). Originality and diversity are likely to thrive when organizations encourage constructive criticism and provide space for differences of thought and opinion. All these steps increase critical thinking and creativity (Kiernan et al., 2019). On the other hand, groupthink thrives in organizations characterized by authoritarian leadership styles. In such organizational ecosystems, leaders suppress the courage of members to raise contradictory opinions. Although healthy levels of cohesiveness could enhance togetherness in teams, excessive cohesiveness could threaten the quality of decisions made by the team (Kiernan et al., 2019). Excessive cohesiveness reduces open discussion and conflict, thereby threatening the optimal balance between the diversity of ideas and social support.

Obtaining quality decisions is not easy because doing so is affected by external and internal factors. A shared understanding of complex problems is a key product of originality and diversity. According to Arthars et al. (2024), humanity is faced with complex challenges that can only be understood and resolved by considering different perspectives and drawing on diverse areas of expertise and knowledge. Teamwork focuses both on constructing shared solutions and enabling coordinated actions among members (Gardiner, 2020). The differences in cognitive resource capacity enhance task-related performance (Stolle et al., 2024). In an interdisciplinary setting, decision-making processes must be undertaken by people who have different problem-solving methods, disciplinary standards, and foundational knowledge of the problem (Zheng et al., 2022). However, the groupthink phenomenon makes these steps challenging due to the belief that interdisciplinary problems have a single solution. Research on teamwork highlights the importance of dialogue, joint focus, and cognitive alignment (Arthars et al., 2024). Originality and diversity require a combination of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge denotes the skills, comprehension, and facts that group participants bring to the meetings, forming the building blocks of final actions. Understanding on the other hand involves thinking and the flexibility to act based on one's knowledge. Shared understanding in groups driven by originality and diversity emerges from collective interpretations of the problems under review.

The Origins of Groupthink

The groupthink concept was introduced by Irving Janis in 1972 while describing the tendency of groups to become vulnerable to suppression and too cohesive (Priyanto & Wening, 2024). He defined groupthink as the tendency of group members to hold the perspective of the majority even when it does not serve the group's best interests. Accordingly, groupthink is the major source of illogical decisions in group settings. The psychologist noted that differences of opinion arising in such groups are suppressed, leading to a limited consideration of alternative opinions or actions (Permana & Wening, 2024). Janis also raised concerns about the adverse impacts of groupthink on moral judgment, reality testing, and mental efficiency.

Janis identified several symptoms associated with this defective decision-making framework. The first notable symptom is limited thought. Unlike groupthink, originality and diversity require teams to be cognitively diverse with differences in thinking styles, values, preferences, assumptions, and beliefs (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2021). A cognitively diverse team can attain better performance through comprehensive processing and knowledge integration (Kiernan et al., 2019). The second symptom is the rationalization of poor decisions. Collective rationalization involves overlooking the warning signs that contradict the group's assumptions (Cleary et al., 2019). Stereotyping adversaries is another key feature of groupthink highlighted by Janis. He stated that groupthink imposes negative views on outsiders' opinions. The pressure for conformity also undermines the quality of decisions in groupthink settings. Group members in such an environment are compelled to adopt the majority's point of view. Self-censorship of ideas is another major concern highlighted by Janis. Group members are likely to maintain group integrity and security by hiding information that they consider harmful (Cleary et al., 2019). Lastly, groupthink is associated with illusions of invulnerability. Heightened levels of optimism prevent teams from identifying and addressing warning signs.

Janis' development of the concept of groupthink was in relation to foreign policy fiascoes. He stated that policy fiascoes affecting the USA resulted from a detrimental phenomenon occurring in groups involved in the decision-making processes. According to Janis, groupthink was an excessive type of concurrence-seeking associated with tightly knit policy-making forums (DiPierro et al., 2021). The concurrence became excessive when members valued the group more than the impacts associated with its decisions. Janis also stated that members of such groups strived for painless and quick unanimity on issues that required detailed deliberation

(Priyanto & Wening, 2024). In a club-like atmosphere, members of the group suppressed their personal doubts, followed the leader's suggestions, and silenced dissenters. According to Janis, the groupthink phenomenon causes group members to have a strong belief in the group's morality and the evil of perceived opponents (DiPierro et al., 2021). The results of this phenomenon include neglect of ethical issues, generating reckless and hasty policies, and having a distorted view of reality. Janis argued that the combination of deficiencies linked to the groupthink phenomenon led to the initiation of projects that turned out to be policy fiascoes.

How Groupthink Could Thwart Originality and Diversity

Contemporary organizations operate in an environment characterized by high instability, volatility, and complexity, necessitating the need for continuous evaluation and improvement (Nadolna & Beyer, 2021). Groupthink values coherence and harmony over critical thinking and accurate analysis by group members. For instance, members of a board could opt to nod in agreement rather than challenge the ideas proposed by the leader, even if they could endanger the organization's performance. According to Umana and Okafor (2019), groupthink suppresses innovation by undermining individual thought, with organizations being unable to adopt emerging technologies and respond to market trends. Rhayu et al. (2023) supported this argument by stating that members of a homogeneous group ignore alternative or critical thinking in favor of a rapid agreement. The groupthink phenomenon is more prevalent in organizations in which diverting from a standard procedure generates undesirable outcomes. Yim and Park (2021) noted that while various opinions are gathered in a groupthink setting, individual opinions are likely to be overlooked and underestimated. Focusing on the majority opinion means that the organization relies on the perspectives of the elite members. Therefore, groupthink stifles the efficiency and creativity of collective thinking.

Groupthink also thwarts originality and diversity by promoting incomplete analysis. Umana and Okafor (2019) noted that groupthink compels dissenters to toe the line and conform to the majority opinion, leaving critical aspects of the decision unquestioned and less understood. Such decisions could lead to disastrous results due to the unwillingness of members to raise critical questions. According to Priyanto and Wening (2024), the groupthink phenomenon is characterized by limited thought, thereby impeding the effectiveness of the decision-making processes. Originality and diversity results in comprehensive analyses of opinions and ideas, a phenomenon that cannot thrive in a groupthink setup. Muceldili et al. (2021) opined that the direct pressure applied on organizational members who articulate concerns, oppose the majority view, and express doubts prevents critical analysis of decisions. Dissenters in such organizational settings minimize deviations and embrace self-censorship.

Umana and Okafor (2019) noted that groupthink undermines originality and diversity through the diffusion of responsibility. The diffusion of responsibility leads to a lack of accountability for outcomes. For instance, team members could deny personal responsibility when decisions were made in a group setting. Rajakumar (2019) shared similar insights by stating that personal accountability is critical in conducting effective decision-making procedures. Groupthink makes organizations less open to public demands, with no individual accepting responsibility for the failure to address social concerns.

Groupthink is also associated with reduced efficiency, thereby undermining originality and diversity. According to Umana and Okafor (2019), group decisions are likely to be less efficient compared to those made by individuals. The requirements for participation, coordination, and discussion necessitate the allocation of more time for group decisions, making them less efficient for addressing organizational challenges. Yim and Park (2021) stated that the pressures for loyalty and uniformity within groups interrupt members' moral judgment and cognitive efficiency. Groupthink has an intimate link with corporate elitism, leading to the tendency among organizational leaders to rationalize all decisions and seek excuses for poor performance.

Are Originality, Diversity, and Groupthink Mutually Exclusive or Inclusive

Originality and diversity, and groupthink, are mutually exclusive concepts. Being mutually exclusive in this context means that the concepts cannot coexist and facilitate effective decision-making in organizational settings. Sastry and Bhat (2024) noted that homogeneous organizations are prone to the groupthink phenomenon when compared to heterogeneous ones. Diversity within teams enhances decision-making by promoting critical discussions (Park et al., 2020). This explains why originality and diversity outperform groupthink in problem-solving tasks. While the former is likely to challenge prevailing assumptions and consider multiple viewpoints, the latter is driven by the pursuit of consensus.

Originality and diversity also assist organizations in making decisions based on a broader range of solutions and ideas. Hence, the literature reveals a strong correlation between originality and diversity and enhanced decision-making (Cleary et al., 2019). This is different from groupthink, which is associated with flawed decision-making due to the failure to prioritize a multiplicity of ideas and perspectives in resolving organizational challenges (Damanik & Wening, 2024). By reducing the availability of alternative ideas, groupthink makes it difficult for organizations to consider the potential shortcomings or risks associated with the decision options. Accordingly, groupthink cannot coexist with originality and diversity, which emphasize the need for critical judgment and the active participation of group members in arriving at final decisions.

Unlike originality and diversity, which promote psychological safety, groupthink does not provide space for constructive criticism. Psychological safety in this context denotes the freedom to express one's thoughts without the fear of consequences (Olaekan et al., 2021). Organizational forums characterized by originality and diversity encourage members to engage in constructive debates and voice dissenting opinions (Leroy et al., 2022). The environment reduces the risk of groupthink, with leaders providing supportive organizational cultures and intentional leadership. Organizational leaders play an important role in cultivating an inclusive atmosphere for originality and diversity (Knippenberg et al., 2020). Based on this, it is evident that the benefits of originality and diversity are not automatic. Rather, organizational leaders must encourage the active participation of team members to leverage diversity as a tool for strategic decision-making.

The predictors of groupthink originality and diversity make them mutually exclusive in organizational settings. For example, groupthink is associated with approval-seeking, conformity, and anxiety (DiPierro et al., 2021). This is different from originality and diversity characterized by self-confidence, critical reasoning, and gathering in-depth insights. The groupthink phenomenon exists when team structures suppress the voices of individuals who question the majority's viewpoint. Maintaining group cohesion is therefore more valuable than raising critical questions (Brandford & Daniel, 2020). While productive interactions within work groups are encouraged by originality and diversity, groupthink considers such actions as a threat to group cohesion. The groupthink theory requires groups to remain united in the pursuit of common goals. The differences in the characteristics of these concepts therefore affirm the conclusion that they are mutually exclusive.

How Organizations Can Overcome Groupthink

One of the key approaches to overcoming the groupthink problem is encouraging team members to be critical evaluators. Rather than merely accepting the perspectives presented to them, they should critically and logically evaluate all the data presented to them. Organizational leaders should therefore encourage members to question different proposals to avoid sliding into groupthink (Leddo et al., 2020). Appointing a 'devil's advocate' could be an effective approach in cases where not all members can be critical evaluators. The appointee will oppose any consensus with new perspectives, fresh interpretations, contrary evidence, and different logic (Akhmad et al., 2021).

Another key approach to promoting diversity is setting up independent groups and inviting new people into the group. When dealing with a group facing the risk of groupthink, splitting it into independent subgroups will encourage members to think for themselves (Sudaryati & Kusuma, 2018). The independent groups will then regroup and share their perspectives in plenary. Inviting new people into the group will introduce fresh ideas. The lack of group allegiance for the new members will eliminate the pressure to conform (Paulus et al., 2019). The outsiders will ask critical questions and will not settle for weak answers. Moreover, the members will not share the group's acquired prejudices and biases that promote the groupthink phenomenon (Žnidaršič et al., 2021). New team members will bring a diversity of knowledge, thinking styles, and ideas.

Ensuring that leaders do not state their preferences upfront will also encourage originality and diversity and reduce groupthink. Groups could have different leaders, including the boss, the expert, or the facilitator. These leaders have a significant impact on the group's thinking due to their status (Barros et al., 2025). To reduce the tendency of members to endorse their leader's position without critical discussion, the latter should hold their point of view and share it at the end of the discussion. Leaders who do not state their position upfront can evaluate the arguments shared by other participants and re-evaluate their position. An effective leader must remain open to diverse perspectives (Henriques, 2020). Accordingly, they should use the contributions of team members to improve their decisions. Balancing one's position with team members' contributions creates a supportive environment and reduces anxiety and discomfort.

Illustrations of the Impact of Groupthink

As discussed earlier, groupthink occurs when pressures for unanimity are overwhelming, and group members are less motivated to consider alternative courses of action (Riisla et al., 2021). The groupthink phenomenon is evident sometimes in the public policy space. Public policies are essential in the cultural, legal, social, educational, economic, industry, and trade fields (Permana & Wening, 2024). Two characteristics of public policies include being easily understandable and being easy to measure. Some of the entities that rely on public policy to fulfill the needs of society include the public sector at varying levels. Policies in these entities are instrumental in solving public problems. However, decision-making in these entities potentially suffers from groupthink and bounded rationality in cases where reaching an agreement is believed to be difficult. The presence of overly cohesive groups in policymaking forums has cultivated the groupthink problem.

Future Research Recommendations

There are multiple gaps in the literature that should be addressed in future research. The first key gap is cross-cultural comparisons. Future research is needed to explore the interplay between originality and diversity, and groupthink, across different cultural

contexts. For instance, research could explore if diversity and groupthink are mutually exclusive across all cultural contexts. The second area for future research is investigating how digital collaboration platforms and AI are influencing originality, diversity, expression, and groupthink. The research objective will be to understand how technology either promotes or inhibits the groupthink phenomenon. Lastly, a longitudinal study is necessary to observe the evolution of team dynamics after implementing diversity interventions in organizational settings.

Conclusion

Decision-making and problem-solving require the input of different people. Janis developed the concept of groupthink after observing policy fiascoes particularly in the American public policy space. Contemporary organizations run the risk of groupthink inhibiting effective decisions that will advance their performance without jeopardizing stakeholders' well-being. Groupthink thwarts originality and diversity by oppressing innovation and creativity. It is on this basis that scholars have concluded that group thinking, and originality and diversity, are mutually exclusive. Some of the drawbacks of groupthink in organizations include the lack of opposition, thwarting creativity, discouraging feedback, overlooking problems, and ruining relationships. However, future research could address some of the unanswered questions, such as the evolution of team dynamics, cultural dynamics, and the role of technology. Public policy decisions will benefit significantly from resolving the groupthink problem.

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