Further Readings


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**Attribution Theory**

To make sense of the world, people develop explanations about what is happening and why people are acting certain ways. When people are interacting with others, communication decisions are influenced by the implicit theories, or attributions, of the participants. Ineffective communication may be partly a consequence of the parties’ idiosyncratic inferences and incompatible interpretations. Attribution theory provides a framework for understanding how people explain their own and others’ behavior. This entry reviews the attribution process and examines the importance of attributions for determining success or failure, for managing conflict in interpersonal relationships, and for determining people’s stigmatizing attitudes and discriminatory behaviors. It ends with information about the fundamental attribution error and the self-perception theory.

An important basis of attribution theory is that people behave the way they do for a reason. In other words, people have reasons for developing their impressions of others. Fritz Heider, one of the first researchers to write about the attribution process, was interested in how one person develops an impression of another. These impressions, he argued, are developed through a three-step process: (1) observation of behavior, (2) determination of whether the behavior is deliberate, and (3) categorization of the behavior as internally or externally motivated.

**Attribution Process**

When a person encounters someone, how he or she interacts with that person is, in part, determined by his or her interpretation of the other person’s behavior. Internal attributions, which are also called dispositional attributions, occur when an observer infers that another’s behavior was caused by something about the person, such as personality, attitude, or upbringing. External attributions, or situational attributions, occur when the observer ascribes the cause of the behavior to the situation or outside circumstances. For example, Daniel’s roommate Tom rushes into the house, slams the door, throws his books on the table, and runs upstairs. Tom does not say a word to Daniel, and Daniel wonders about what is happening. Daniel can develop different explanations for Tom’s behavior. If he attributes Tom’s behavior to an internal factor, he might think that Tom is rude and inconsiderate. If he attributes Tom’s behavior to external factors, he might conclude that Tom is late for an appointment and rushing to get things done. Daniel’s attributions will affect how he interacts with Tom when they next encounter each other. Based on Daniel’s internal attribution, he may ignore Tom when Tom comes down the stairs. However, if Daniel selects an external attribution, then when Tom walks down the stairs, Daniel may ask whether Tom needs anything. Daniel’s attribution affects his
actions, and his actions can affect how the roommates manage their interaction and relationship.

Before Daniel decides whether to attribute Tom's behavior to dispositional or to situational factors, he needs to examine a few other factors. Harold Kelley, a social psychologist specializing in personal relationships, proposed that there are three general guidelines that influence people's attributions: consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness.

Consensus describes how other people, in the same circumstances, would behave. If all Daniel's roommates tend to rush into the house and run upstairs, then Tom's behavior is likely determined by the situation, leading Daniel to make an external attribution. If Tom is the only one who behaves this way, Daniel is more likely to make an internal attribution.

Consistency refers to whether the person being observed behaves the same way, in the same situation, over time. If every time Tom entered the house he behaved this way, Daniel would likely make an internal attribution. However, if this was an unusual way for Tom to behave, Daniel would likely look for an external explanation.

Distinctiveness refers to the variations in the observed person's behavior across situations. If, for example, Tom rushed through the door at work and ran through the hallways at school, his behavior on entering his house would not be distinct from his normal behavior. In that case, Daniel would likely attribute it to internal, dispositional causes. Conversely, if in most situations, Tom was mellow and slow moving, Daniel might attribute his rushing behavior to external, situational causes.

Although each of these three factors is important for attributing cause to either internal or external factors, when an observer can combine these factors, patterns can emerge. For example, when a person behaves a certain way over time and across situations, but others do not behave the same way, people tend to make dispositional attributions (That's just the way she is). However, when someone's behavior is not typical of that person or expected in the situation, observers have a difficult time attributing cause to the person or the situation. In these cases, the observer tends to assume that something peculiar is happening (I don't know what's going on; something must be wrong).

In addition to the three factors Kelley originally identified, two more guidelines influence whether an observer makes an internal or external attribution. If a person violates a social norm, behavior that is typical or expected for a situation, others tend to make internal attributions. Additionally, in the absence of situational cues, observers tend to make dispositional attributions.

Attribution theory provides a framework for understanding both our own and others' behaviors. It provides guidelines for interpreting actions, so it is useful for examining motivations for achievement and conflict in interpersonal relationships. This theory has also been used to examine stigmatizing behavior and discrimination.

Attribution and Achievement

Bernard Weiner extended attribution theory to how people explain their own and others' success and failure. He contends that interpretations of achievement can be explained with three dimensions of behavior: locus of control (Whose fault is it?), stability (Is it ongoing?), and controllability (Can I change it?). First, a person's success or failure is attributable to either internal factors (I am a smart person) or to external factors (My computer crashed). Second, the cause of the success or failure can be either stable (It's always going to be like this) or unstable (This is a one-time event). Finally, the event may be perceived as controllable (I can change this if I want to) or uncontrollable (Nothing I do can change this situation).

These three dimensions, together, create eight scenarios that people use to explain their own achievements and disappointments:

1. Internal-stable-uncontrollable (I'm not very smart)
2. Internal-stable-controllable (I always wait until the last minute)
3. Internal-unstable-uncontrollable (I felt ill)
4. Internal-unstable-controllable (I forgot about the assignment)
5. External-stable-uncontrollable (The teacher's expectations are unrealistic)
6. External-stable-controllable (The teacher hates me)
7. External-unstable-uncontrollable (I was in a car accident)
8. External-unstable-controllable (The dog ate my homework)
Understanding how to motivate students to achieve academically requires an understanding of their attributions. People's explanations for their own success or failure will help determine how hard they work in similar situations. Students who perceive that their successes and failures are controllable are more likely to continue to work hard academically. When people perceive that they have no control over a situation, believe that the situation is permanent, and think that the outcomes are due to their own characteristics, they are likely to stop working and may exhibit signs of learned helplessness.

Attributions and Interpersonal Conflict
People tend to choose conflict styles based on their attributions about their partner's intent to cooperate, the locus of responsibility for the conflict, and the stability of the conflict. Their attributions about these issues influence the strategies they adopt; specifically, they tend to adopt conflict management strategies they believe are congruent with their partner's projected responses. The attribution process causes people to see others as more competitive, more responsible for the conflict, and more stable and traitlike than they perceive themselves to be. They underestimate the role of unstable situation factors and overestimate the extent to which behavior is caused by stable personality traits. The bias in this process often discourages integrative modes of conflict resolution. The choice of conflict strategies affects the likelihood of conflict resolution and the degree of satisfaction in the relationship.

Attributions and Stigmatizing Behavior
Attribution theory is an important framework for understanding why people endorse stigmatizing attitudes and engage in discriminatory behaviors. A person's attributions about the cause and controllability of another's illness or situation can lead to emotional reactions that affect their willingness to help and their likelihood of punishing the other. If you assume that another person's difficult situation is that person's fault and could have been prevented, you may be less likely to offer assistance and more likely to react with anger. For example, Sue is an office manager and Terry is a new employee. If Sue thinks that Terry's unorthodox and unpredictable behavior is caused by injuries he suffered when he was a child, she may be tolerant and understanding. If, however, Sue thinks Terry's unorthodox behavior is the result of years of illegal drug use, she may be more likely to get angry with him and take punitive actions. People's attributions about the causes of another's illness can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Fundamental Attribution Error
The fundamental attribution error is a common attribution error in which people overemphasize personality or dispositional (internal) causes of others' negative behavior or bad outcomes and underestimate the situational (external) factors. When interpreting another's positive actions or outcomes, however, people overemphasize the situational causes and underestimate the dispositional causes. For example, Alicia is a server in a restaurant, and one of her coworkers, Julia, just got a really big tip. Alicia thinks to herself, "Wow, Julia keeps getting lucky because the hostess keeps giving her the good customers." An hour later, another coworker complains that he got a bad tip, and Alicia thinks, "Well, if you weren't such a crappy server, you would get good tips." Alicia just committed the fundamental attribution error. She assumed that when something bad happened to one coworker, it was the coworker's fault and that when something good happened to another coworker, it was the situation that brought about the positive result.

Conversely, the self-serving bias (or actor–observer bias) is an error in which individuals attribute their own success and failure to different factors. One's own success and positive outcomes are attributed to internal, dispositional characteristics whereas one's failures or negative outcomes are ascribed to external, situational causes. To continue the restaurant example, Alicia gets a really big tip and thinks, "I worked really hard for that group and gave great service," but when another group leaves a bad tip, she thinks, "They are cheapskates."

In sum, attribution errors work in the following ways:

- When good things happen to me, I deserve it (I worked hard or I am a special person).
- When good things happen to you, you don’t deserve it (the teacher likes you or you just got lucky).
- When bad things happen to me, it’s not my fault (the teacher doesn’t like me or he started it).
- When bad things happen to you, it’s your fault (you should work harder or you should be more careful).

**Self-Perception Theory**

Daryl Bem’s self-perception theory, like attribution theory, relies on internal and external attributions to explain behavior. However, instead of observing others, we use the same process to interpret our own behavior. Bem argues that we come to know our own thoughts and beliefs by observing our actions and interpreting what caused our behaviors. Our explanation for our behavior is determined by the presence or absence of situational cues. For example, if Debbie earns $100 campaigning for 3 hours for a politician, she can attribute her behavior to external causes (“I did it for the money”). If, however, Debbie earns only $5 for her 3 hours of campaigning, she will likely attribute her behavior to internal causes (“I did it because I like the candidate”). Self-perception theory is important in persuasion research because people who are internally motivated are more likely to maintain behaviors.

*Virginia M. McDermott*

See also Cognitive Theories; Conflict Communication Theories; Interpersonal Communication Theories; Learning and Communication; Persuasion and Social Influence Theories

**Further Readings**


**AUDIENCE THEORIES**

Audience theories have been of crucial importance for the way mediated communication has been understood since the first modern communication theories were formulated almost a century ago. They have followed the changing scientific climates and successive intellectual fashions in the social sciences and humanities, affecting both the different ways in which communication processes have been conceptualized and the ways in which succeeding scholarly traditions have researched them. In recent years, the concept of audience has been put into question as the emerging digital, interactive media appear to be blurring the deep-rooted distinction between media production and media consumption that has characterized the era of mass media.

The main theoretical difficulty with the concept of *audience* is that it is a single term applied to an increasingly diverse and complex reality. The term has thus come to comprise many shades of meaning gathered around a common core. This core denotes a group of people being addressed by and paying attention to a communication message that someone is producing and intending for them to perceive, experience, and respond to in one way or another.
various communication orientations. Co-cultural group members, for example, will use an assertive assimilation orientation if they seek to fit in with dominant group members through behaviors that assert their own rights without violating the rights of others. This orientation would involve the cocultural practices of extensive preparation (engaging in extensive amounts of groundwork before interactions with others), overcompensating (working extra hard in order to be accepted), manipulating stereotypes (exploiting existing stereotypical views for personal and professional gain), and bargaining (creating overt or covert agreements to ignore co-cultural differences).

In comparison, an assertive separation orientation would be enacted for co-cultural group members seeking to work independent of dominant group members. This orientation involves communicating self (interacting with others openly, authentically, and genuinely), intragroup networking (working with other co-cultural group members), exemplifying strength (promoting the positive attributes of one’s co-cultural group), and embracing stereotypes (redefining traditional negative stereotypes and incorporating them into a positive self-concept).

In addition to these two orientations, the theory conceptualizes seven others—nonassertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, nonassertive accommodation, assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive separation, and aggressive separation—each of which has several co-cultural practices associated with it. While early research defined this framework, subsequent research has continued to fine-tune these co-cultural orientations by adding, revising, and debating how different practices are used for different purposes in different situational contexts.

Co-cultural theory has been heralded for its effectiveness in creating a theoretical lens to understand the communication behaviors of underrepresented group members from their own respective perspectives. In addition, it is valued for the ways in which it resists cultural generalizations by highlighting the diverse forms of co-cultural communication. Simultaneously, the theory reveals the commonalities inherent in how individuals attempt to negotiate discriminatory societal structures, regardless of the source of their oppression. Critics of co-cultural theory have questioned the logic of this approach and pointed to the dangers of equating sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of social oppressions. Others have argued that the process of co-cultural communication is not specific to particular groups; instead it is something that all individuals experience as they occupy less powerful positions throughout their lives. Despite some of the limitations associated with this theory, co-cultural theory holds great promise for promoting an increased understanding of the inextricable relationship of culture, power, and communication.

Mark P. Orbe

See also Culture and Communication; Feminist Communication Theories; Feminist Standpoint Theory; Intercultural Communication Theories; Muted Group Theory; Phenomenology

Further Readings


Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory is concerned with how perception and cognition influence and are influenced by motivation and emotion. Hundreds of experiments have tested dissonance processes. For the most part, these experiments have explored
the ways that the experience of cognitive dissonance causes attitude and behavior changes.

Leon Festinger formulated the original theory of cognitive dissonance in the mid-1950s. Festinger theorized that when an individual holds two or more elements of knowledge that are relevant to each other but inconsistent with one another, a state of discomfort is created. He called this unpleasant state dissonance. Festinger theorized that the degree of dissonance in relation to a cognition \( D/(D + C) \), where \( D \) is the sum of cognitions consonant with a particular cognition and \( C \) is the sum of cognitions consonant with that same particular cognition, with each cognition weighted for importance.

Festinger theorized that persons are motivated by the unpleasant state of dissonance to engage in cognitive work so as to reduce the inconsistency. To reduce the dissonance, individuals could add consonant cognitions, subtract dissonant cognitions, increase the importance of consonant cognitions, or decrease the importance of dissonant cognitions. One of the ways of reducing dissonance assessed most often is change in attitudes. Attitude change in response to a state of dissonance is expected to be in the direction of the cognition that is most resistant to change. Tests of the theory often assume that one’s most recent behavior is usually most resistant to change, because it is often very difficult to undo that behavior.

After a decision, all the cognitions that favor the chosen alternative are consonant with the decision, while all the cognitions that favor the rejected alternative are dissonant. The greater the number and importance of consonant cognitions and the lesser the number and importance of consonant cognitions, the greater the degree of dissonance experienced by the individual. In a decision situation, dissonance is typically greater the closer the alternatives are in attractiveness (as long as each alternative has several distinguishing characteristics). Dissonance caused by a decision can be reduced by viewing the chosen alternative as more attractive and/or viewing the rejected alternative as less attractive.

Dissonance is typically aroused when a person acts in a way that is contrary to his or her attitudes, especially when no one provides encouragement or incentive for doing so. Individuals may reduce this dissonance by changing their attitudes to be more consistent with their actions. Dissonance can also be aroused by exposure to information that is inconsistent with beliefs or attitudes.

Some theorists hypothesized that the effects were due to nonmotivational, cognitive processes or impression-management concerns. However, subsequent research confirmed that dissonance is a motivated process. Beginning in the late 1960s, researchers began to propose motivational explanations for dissonance effects that differed from Festinger’s theory. Four revisions have been proposed.

Elliot Aronson proposed that dissonance is not due merely to an inconsistency between cognitions. Instead, he posited that dissonance occurs when a person acts in a way that violates his or her self-concept, that is, when a person performs a behavior inconsistent with his or her sense of self. Since most persons have a positive self-concept, dissonance is most often experienced when a person behaves negatively, behaving in an incompetent, irrational, or immoral manner. One of the primary predictions derived from this revision is that individuals with low self-esteem and individuals with high self-esteem should respond with less and more dissonance reduction (e.g., attitude change), respectively, because in dissonance experiments, individuals with high self-esteem are induced to act in ways that are more discrepant from their positive self-views. Experiments testing this prediction have produced mixed results.

Claude Steele’s self-affirmation theory proposed that persons possess a motive to maintain an overall self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy. Accordingly, dissonance-induced attitude change occurs because dissonance threatens this positive self-image. While Festinger’s dissonance theory posited that individuals are motivated to reconcile inconsistent cognitions, Steele proposed that individuals are merely motivated to affirm the integrity of the self. In support of this idea, Steele presented experiments in which, following a dissonance induction, participants either were or were not presented with an opportunity to affirm an important value. When participants were allowed to affirm an important value, dissonance-related attitude change did not occur. Other experiments have suggested that making important but non-self-affirming values salient reduces
dissonance by reducing the individual’s perception of the importance of the dissonant act, consistent with Festinger’s theory.

Joel Cooper and Russell Fazio proposed the idea that the discomfort experienced in dissonance experiments was due, not to an inconsistency between the individual’s cognitions, but rather to feeling personally responsible for producing an aversive consequence. In support of this idea, experiments revealed that dissonance-related attitude change occurred only in conditions in which an aversive consequence was produced. More recently, experiments have found dissonance-related arousal and attitude change in induced compliance conditions where individuals do not produce aversive consequences.

Several experiments since 1995 have supported the original conception of dissonance theory. But why does dissonance evoke this state? Eddie Harmon-Jones proposed an action-based model of cognitive dissonance in an attempt to answer this question. The action-based model proposes that the perceptions and cognitions likely to arouse dissonance are those that are associated with action tendencies. The action-based model further proposes that dissonance between cognitions evokes an aversive state because it has the potential to interfere with effective and unconflicted action. Dissonance reduction, by bringing cognitions into consonance, serves the function of facilitating the execution of effective and unconflicted action. Experiments have revealed that experimentally increasing the degree of action orientation experienced following difficult decisions increases the degree of dissonance reduction.

Eddie Harmon-Jones

See also Attitude Theory; Persuasion and Social Influence Theories; Power, Interpersonal

Further Readings


Cognitive Rules Model

See Cognitive Theories

Cognitive Theories

The term cognition simply refers to mental activities. Thus, in everyday conversation, when people make reference to paying attention, planning, forgetting, guessing, daydreaming, and so on, they are invoking cognitive concepts. The domain of mental activities is obviously very broad, encompassing everything that transpires from the initial perception of a stimulus (e.g., the sight and scent of roses and letter shapes on a card) to evocation of thoughts and emotions, and even production of overt responses (e.g., verbal and nonverbal expressions of joy and appreciation). Cognitive theories provide an important window on communication processes because both message production and message comprehension ultimately transpire in the mind.

The objective of cognitive theories is to describe the mental system(s) that give rise to the various phenomena of interest. In other words, explanation (and prediction and control) comes from specifying the nature of the mental structures and processes responsible for producing a particular phenomenon (in much the same way that one might explain the movement of an automobile by describing the action of the pistons, drive shaft, and so on). At the most fundamental level, cognitive theories focus on explicating foundational mental processes such as the nature of attention, perception, comprehension, memory, and response production. As an approach to illuminating the sorts of issues of interest to communication scholars, cognitive theories have been developed to address phenomena as diverse as communication skill acquisition, social anxiety, memory for messages in the mass media, romantic relationship development, and group decision making.

Historical Background

Cognitive science is a broad, interdisciplinary enterprise that draws from numerous intellectual
the real-time destruction of the homelands. These videos perform the role of virtual palimpsests—old "writings" that show through new ones—demonstrating the powerful role of the media in contemporary diasporas.

Marie Gillespie's 1995 study set a benchmark in its detailed audience ethnography and its demonstration of the need for different methodologies to capture consumption of various media formats (mainstream soaps; news; advertising; and community-specific, or narrowcast, media, such as Hindi television and film) among diasporic communities. This study examined the microprocesses, or daily practices, involved in the creation of a British Asian identity among young people in Southall, in West London. This new identity emerged against a backdrop of new ethnicities that surfaced within the framework of postcolonial migration and the globalization of communications.

The study of the diasporic ethnoscapes and the world-spanning media flows—to a significant extent a condition of the ethnoscapes' existence—are dynamic internationally as well as locally. Such work enables cross-disciplinary intersections of cultural and media studies with anthropology, political science, demography, and geography. Cultural and media studies' nuanced attention to structures of feeling, identity, and community dynamics lend qualitative depth and texture to the more data-driven approaches to all aspects of minority cultures seen in the social science disciplines.

Studies of diasporic cultures, then, are as much about innovative uses of the Internet and other newer technologies as they are about heritage, preservation of identity, and nostalgia. As showcased in Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas, the prevalence of computers in the home, use of the Internet, and participation in globally oriented Web forums were higher among economic migrants from east Asia to Australia than among the general population. An outward-looking, cosmopolitan ethos was a major part of the cultural capital of such households.

Stuart Cunningham

Further Readings


**DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS**

**Diffusion** is the process by which an innovation makes its way over time to members of a social system. An **innovation** is the introduction of something new—a project, practice, or idea. The **innovation–decision process** is the process of progression an individual goes through from first encountering an innovation to its adoption. **Innovativeness** is a measure of early adoption; individuals are considered innovative and potential change agents if they are more willing to adopt new ideas than other members of a system and likely to do so earlier than others. Finally, the **rate of adoption** of an innovation is the relative speed with which an innovation is adopted.

**Background**

The French sociologist and legal scholar Gabriel Tarde can be said to be the originator of the basic idea of the diffusion of innovations; he coined and developed concepts that would become basic to diffusion research, such as opinion leadership and the **S curve of adoption** (although he used different terms). Tarde's work was followed by anthropologists such as Clark Wissler, who analyzed the diffusion of the horse among the Plains Indians—an
innovative practice that allowed them to engage in almost constant warfare with neighboring tribes.

All the components of what is associated with the contemporary research paradigm of diffusion of innovations came together in a study in 1942 by Bruce Ryan and Neil Gross about how the adoption of hybrid seed corn diffused among Iowa farmers. Agricultural officials wondered why this technology—which resulted in as much as a 20% increase in production per acre—was not adopted more quickly (it took about 12 years from initial introduction to widespread adoption of hybrid corn). Ryan and Gross discovered that the farmers had to change virtually all their practices in relation to growing corn, including purchasing corn from a company rather than using corn from the previous year as seed (especially difficult during the Depression). This study also suggested that the rate of adoption of most innovations will form a bell-shaped or S curve, with a few people adopting in the beginning, followed by mass adoption, and then a dropping off because of the success of the diffusion and adoption processes. This study became the model for many diffusion studies during the 1950s, conducted by rural sociologists studying a host of other agricultural innovations.

Meanwhile, the diffusion approach moved beyond rural sociology to influence other social sciences, including marketing, political science, education, geography, public health, and economics. A major impetus to diffusion research in the social sciences was the work of Everett Rogers. Rogers earned his PhD in sociology at Iowa State University, where the studies of the diffusion of hybrid corn were done; his dissertation summarized what had been done on the subject. This dissertation became the basis for his now classic book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, published in 1962, in which Rogers provided a general model of diffusion, appropriate across disciplines and research paradigms.

While diffusion has been studied by scholars across disciplines, it has been of particular interest to communication scholars because at its core, the diffusion of innovations is a communication process. First, the innovation is made known through communication channels; if individuals are unable to find out about an innovation, diffusion simply cannot occur. Mass media and mass communication are involved in the process in that they contribute to awareness about the new idea or product. Interpersonal communication is also critical to the diffusion process: The decision to adopt an innovation depends largely on discussions with peers who have already evaluated and made a decision about whether to adopt the innovation. Today, of course, with cell phones, smartphones, and the Internet, the interpersonal—mass communication link is blurred, and potential innovators are just as likely to find out about an innovation via a computer-mediated format and to evaluate it the same way—through Internet chat rooms and online product reviews.

Other communication processes are involved as the potential innovator considers the information received. Because of the novelty of the innovation, the individual experiences a high degree of uncertainty about it. Thus, studies of attitude change, uncertainty reduction, and decision making come into play in the diffusion process, especially as they impact behavior change since diffusion ultimately is about adopting a new behavior.

Over the years, diffusion of innovation has explained the process of adoption of many new innovations, from family planning among women in Korea to doctors prescribing tetracycline to safe-sex practices among gay men in San Francisco to the adoption of the Internet. How quickly news is diffused about events, such as September 11 and the explosion of the space shuttle Columbia, is another avenue of diffusion research. And the diffusion-of-innovation paradigm has also been used to study resistance to innovations—why a keyboard arranged so that the strongest fingers strike the most frequently used letters of the alphabet has never caught on.

Arvind Singhal

*See also* Media and Mass Communication Theories; Two-Step and Multi-Step Flow

**Further Readings**


**DIGITAL CULTURES**

Digital cultures are social formations produced exclusively through engagement with information and communication technologies (ICTs). Also referred to as cybercultures, virtual communities, online communities, or Internet communities, they encompass a wide array of cultural interests and practices in different types of forums that are accessible only by a computer or other device with Internet connectivity. At the heart of any digital culture are social interaction and a network of relationships; communication scholars have an abiding interest in studying issues of identity, community, and access in relation to them.

These terms can be traced back to and continue to be informed by the concept of *cyberspace*. In the early 1980s, William Gibson coined the term in his cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*. Bodies are described as mere “meat” that is discarded when the characters “jack in” to their computers to immerse themselves in a virtual reality. In the early 1990s, scholarly and popular accounts of ICTs borrowed Gibson’s term to imagine a spatial context for *computer-mediated communication*. The majority of these accounts were celebratory, emphasizing the advantages of leaving behind the body and its problematic identities (e.g., race and gender). Cyberspace was seen as having the potential to revitalize the public sphere politically and socially and forge new connections and commonalities among disparate groups.

Howard Rheingold can be credited with expanding the focus of discussion to the digital cultures that comprise cyberspace. He argued that the search for community was central to the social use of ICTs and described his experiences in the virtual pubs and salons of the Whole Earth Electronic Link, a San Francisco–based bulletin board service in the pre–World Wide Web era. The other technologies that enabled the creation of text-based virtual communities at that time included Internet relay chat (chat rooms), Listserv (electronic mailing lists), Multi-User Domain (MUD; multiplayer computer games), and Usenet (newsgroups).

A number of scholars have theorized about cyberspace and digital culture based on behaviors observed on MUDs and Usenet groups. MUDs involve fantasy and action role-play, loosely based on the game Dungeons and Dragons, but also social interaction. One of the most popular social MUDs was LambdaMOO, founded in 1990. Participants interact in various rooms of a large house. According to Sherry Turkle, the value of virtual role-play is being able to experience the fluidity of identity as characterized by postmodern theory. The reverse is also true: There can be real-life negative consequences of cyberspace interactions. The virtual rape that took place in LambdaMOO is perhaps the most infamous example. The “cyberrape” was performed by an avatar named Mr. Bungle, who ran a “voodoo doll” subprogram that allowed him to engage in sexual acts that could be attributed to other characters in the virtual community. The duration and intensity of these acts resulted in feelings of violation for participants in real life, raising questions about the boundaries between real-life and virtual communities.

As for the Usenet, it is seen by some as the original Internet community. Started by two Duke University computer science students in 1979, it began with five overarching categories to organize its newsgroups: alt.* (alternative), bus.* (business), comp.* (computing), rec.* (recreation and leisure), and soc.* (social issues). When America
Groupthink

Irving Janis used the term groupthink to refer to a condition in which highly cohesive groups strive to reach unanimity in their decision making at the expense of adequately examining alternative solutions. Such groups desire to maintain a cohesive atmosphere in the group to the extent that members are not to “rock the boat” or “stir the waters.” The condition ultimately leads to a deterioration in decision processes that usually results in poor decisions. The groupthink hypothesis is intimately tied to how group members communicate with one another. This entry explores groupthink, identifying its antecedent conditions, corresponding symptoms, effect on decision processes and decisions, and ways the phenomenon might be prevented.

Although Irving Janis did not coin the term, his conceptualization of groupthink has had the most significant and lasting impact on those wishing to learn more about group and organizational functioning. It all started with the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In April 1961, a rebel force backed by the U.S. government made a landing at the Bay of Pigs, Cuba, in an effort to topple the newly established government of Fidel Castro. President John F. Kennedy and some of his most trusted advisers made decisions to cancel plans for additional rounds of bombings of Cuban airfields, changed the original and better landing site of the invasion force, and failed to provide air support for the rebels. The decisions doomed any hopes of the success of the invasion. A substantial number of the rebel force were killed in battle or captured and executed.

Irving Janis later claimed the Bay of Pigs disaster was one of the biggest fiascos ever perpetrated by a government. He was bothered with the question of how groups of learned people could collectively make such bad decisions. He suggested this topic to his daughter, who was writing a term paper. Examining her research, Janis’s curiosity was piqued, and he subsequently formulated the essential features of what would come to be known as the groupthink hypothesis.

There are certain characteristics that lay the foundation for groupthink. Among these antecedents are group cohesiveness, structural faults, and a provocative situational context. Cohesiveness refers to a state of mutual liking and attraction among group members; group members are amiable and united and have a desire to maintain positive relationships, and a feeling of esprit de corps is present. Structural faults may include the group’s insulation from external sources of information and counsel, lack of an established tradition of impartiality on the part of the leader, lack of norms for decision-making procedures, and homogeneity of group members with regard to social background and ideology. Provocative situational contexts are the kinds that impose high levels of stress on group members. These stresses may be due to a previous or recent record of failure, perceptions that the task may be too difficult, or the belief that there is no morally correct alternative available.

Of the three antecedents, cohesiveness is believed to be primary and, when paired with one of the other two antecedents, results in a greater likelihood that the group will suffer from groupthink. When cohesion is moderate to high, and one of the other antecedents is present, group members are likely to have a concurrence-seeking tendency when making decisions. This tendency in turn is
likely to manifest itself in the eight symptoms of groupthink outlined by Janis:

1. Illusion of invulnerability: Members are highly optimistic and willing to take extreme risks.

2. Collective efforts to rationalize: Members cast doubt on the validity of information that brings into question assumptions made.

3. Illusion of morality: The moral consequences of a decision go unexplored because group members do not question the morality of the group.

4. Excessive stereotyping: The group views rivals as too evil to warrant serious negotiation with them, or too weak or stupid in efforts to defeat the group.

5. Pressure to conform: Pressure is brought to bear against those members who disagree with the group, often through claims that such disagreements are indicative of disloyalty.

6. Self-censorship: Members do not voice dissenting or contrary views to the group consensus.

7. Illusion of unanimity: There is a false perception that members have achieved a consensus; silence is consent.

8. Self-appointed mindguards: Some members take on the role of guarding the group from information that might call into question the effectiveness and morality of decisions made.

If these symptoms are present, the group fails to use vigilance in its decision-making process. When groups engage in vigilant decision making, they adequately (a) survey the possible alternatives/solutions available; (b) survey the objectives to be accomplished; (c) examine the risks and benefits associated with the alternatives; (d) perform an information search; (e) process the information in an unbiased manner; (f) reappraise the alternatives in light of risks and benefits before making a final choice; and (g) work out a plan for implementing the desired choice, along with contingency plans should additional risks associated with that choice become known.

When vigilance is not present, the likelihood of making bad decisions increases and ultimately may result in a decision-making fiasco. Given the negative consequences of groupthink, there are several steps a group should take in an effort to prevent it. The group leader should establish an atmosphere of open inquiry and impartiality and should withhold stating preferred courses of action at the outset. The leader should also encourage members to air objections and doubts; one or more members should play the role of devil's advocate, taking and voicing informed positions contrary to the prevailing position. Several subgroups working on the same problem should be formed, coming together at a future time to iron out differences. Finally, individuals from outside the group should be brought into group meetings to observe and challenge prevailing views, especially those of powerful group members.

The research that has investigated the groupthink phenomenon has at times yielded equivocal results. Primarily, the importance of cohesiveness in the groupthink model has been questioned. As a consequence, some have called for a reformulation of the original model to include other variables that might help to better explain the tendency toward ineffective group decision making. Among these calls has been a need to focus on, for example, the concept of collective efficacy (the belief of group members about their ability to effectively accomplish the group's task) and the role of motivations in decision making.

The groupthink hypothesis has spurred much research, and the phenomenon has been put forward as a reason for faulty decision making in many historical contexts: the Bay of Pigs, Pearl Harbor, Viet Nam, the Watergate break-in, and the space shuttle Challenger explosion. The research and analyses concerning the groupthink hypothesis have also had a tremendous impact on policymaking in organizational and community settings. In the communication discipline, Janis and his colleagues' work on groupthink has directly influenced the development of the functional perspective of effective decision making and the vigilant interaction theory. The hypothesis has retained its appeal in the years since it was first put forward, as evidenced by the number of scholarly references to it, the research it has spurred, and the changes it has instigated in the workplace.

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See also Bona Fide Group Theory; Creativity in Groups; Functional Group Communication Theory; Group Communication Theories

Further Readings


