Groupthink and Quality of Decision-Making Process Among the Top Managers of the Public Universities of Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Groupthink has caused teams of qualified members to make some decisions with catastrophic consequences. Countering groupthink has attracted a lot of research interest. Yet, it is still not established whether teams could fight groupthink with better structures. Approving or disproving this can add to the literature around groupthink and how to avoid it.

This quantitative research hypothesized that even teams who have superb quality decision-making processes can fall victims to groupthink. To test this claim, it used questionnaire forms (n=67) to collect primary data from the college committee members of several public sector universities in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The collected data were then analyzed using Pearson's Correlation, one-way ANOVA and linear regression.

The research concluded groupthink symptoms exist among the college committees of the public universities in Kurdistan. It also concluded that the quality of the process with which they make decisions is superb. This brought about the inference that groups and organizations cannot control for with a good quality decision-making process only. The study also concluded that although groupthink symptoms are available regardless of the demographic factors of the team, having team members of qualified academic backgrounds and rich and relevant experiences can contribute to the quality of decision-making process.

Keywords: Groupthink, decision-making process, quality of the decision-making process, public universities, top managers

Introduction

The quality of the decision-making process is a significant indicator of the effectiveness of individuals and groups in all types of organizations. It is a main measure of the quality of almost every activity in which it involves those organizations. The quality of this process is measured by how transparent, rational and participative it is. One of the most used theories of studying decision-making is Janis's idea of groupthink. Groupthink is present when the team structure suppresses the individual voices that disagree with the viewpoints stated by the group for reasons such as keeping the group cohesion intact. Authors have proposed different antecedents and symptoms to recognize groupthink. Some of those include high group cohesion, seclusion and the illusion of unanimous decisions.

Despite the rich theoretical background that groupthink enjoys, there still are venues that need further detection. For example, it is still opaque whether teams with high academic backgrounds such as those of college committees who follow a high-quality decision-making process can avoid groupthink.

To understand this, the current quantitative study takes a different approach to analyze the symptoms of groupthink and the quality of the decision-making process. It depends on self-report questionnaire forms by some of the most academically qualified teams in Kurdistan

Region, the college committees of the public universities in the region. In doing so, this research tries to answer some important questions such as whether the antecedents of groupthink are available and if they are demography dependent. It will also check for the quality of the decision-making process adopted by the college committees and how this is correlated with the groupthink antecedents.

One source of the importance of this research comes from the importance of each variable it studies. First, groupthink is one of the important threats to work groups' productive interactions and hence the quality of the processes they design to make decisions. The decision-making process is just as important. As, it could be the sole indicator of the effectiveness of the groups and organizations who make those decisions. Another factor contributing to the importance of this study is the sample it studies. The sample represents some of the highest ranked decision makers of a very important sector; that is the public sector universities. Most of the research around this topic has been case study analysis and laboratory studies. This work, however, takes a different approach to study the topic. It uses the questionnaire method for data collection, which is considered the first such approach up to the awareness of the authors of the current research.

This research paper is divided into four main parts. Part one focuses on reviewing the existing literature around the variables of this research. The following part explains the methods used for collecting and analyzing data. The data analyses, discussions and findings are presented in part three; followed by the conclusions and recommendations.

Literature review

2.1 Groupthink

Groupthink is one of the best-known concepts of group decision-making. In fact, it is considered the best-known theory of breaking down the group decision-making process and outcome (Kowert, 2002). It was founded and defined by Janis (1972) as the failure of one or more group members to realistically express and test alternative courses of action other than what is stated by the group itself. This failure, according to Turner and Pratkanis (1994) is because of the group members' attempts to maintain a shared positive group identity through active avoidance of showing and discussing different viewpoints. The outcome of this, as derived by Sims and Sauser (2013), is defective or unethical decisions.

Most of the initial research on the concept of groupthink has been case study analysis (Park, 2000). Janis (1972) himself started by analyzing seven famous fiascoes to conclude that five were due to failure in decision-making caused by groupthink. In similar attempts, each of Morgan (1986), Sims (1992), Esser (1995) and Badie (2010) concluded similar results. However, some laboratory tests by Kroon, Kreveld and Rabbie (1992) and Turner and Pratkanis (1994) have yielded weak or no support for the hypothesized relationship. They found out that some so-called important prerequisites for groupthink did not cause the phenomenon of groupthink. These differences, as concluded by Esser (1998) in a thorough analysis of the body of research and confirmed by Park (2000) and Henningsen, Cruz and Eden (2006) are due to the differences in the design and purposes of the two research approaches. Despite the diversity of views and limited verifiable support for or against the idea, groupthink has been widely accepted among various scholars of the field (Park, 2000).

Contemporary research applies groupthink topic to a variety of cases. For example, Rovio, Eskola, Kozub, Duda and Lintunen (2009) apply it to a junior league ice-hockey team and confirm that groupthink can lead to poorer performance in decision-making among sports teams. Similarly, Ko (2005) takes a culture-specific approach and studies groupthink in Hong

Kong organizations to conclude that culture and status are the key factors causing groupthink. Also, groupthink symptoms and their shattering effects on decisions and performance are relevant in academic settings (Klein & Stern, 2009).

Janis and his colleagues concluded that there are antecedents or prerequisites that could cause this decision-making ineffectiveness. The most important antecedent of groupthink is group cohesion; whereas the other ones are secondary and are effective only if combined with cohesion (Baron, 2005; Henningsen, Cruz, & Eden, 2006). As far as groupthink theory is concerned, group cohesion refers a dynamic process reflected in the tendency of a group to remain united in the process of achieving the group's shared objectives and/or the group members' wellbeing (Rovio, Eskola, Kozub, Duda, & Lintunen, 2009). Other antecedents that could lead group decisions to go awry include the group's insulation from any strong outside influences, lack of good leadership and lack of proper norms and procedures to ensure effective evaluation of alternative courses of action. Finally, the homogeneity of group members in terms of either attitudes or ideology are among the reasons that could lead to groupthink (Janis, 1972; Janis, 1982).

These antecedents, in turn, lead to what Janis (1972;1982) calls concurrence seeking. Concurrence seeking is when the antecedents of groupthink produce pressure on group members to conform to the group position and show their agreement with the group's proposed decision (Henningsen, Cruz, & Eden, 2006). The result is a decision that is thought of as a group consensus; while there might be individuals who secretly disagree but are too reluctant to bring their concerns into the open.

Concurrence seeking is followed by showing a group of signs that Janis and Mann (1977) have called the symptoms of groupthink. These symptoms include collective rationalizations, the pressure to conform, the emergence of mind guards, biased perceptions of out-group members, self-censorship, illusion of invulnerability, illusion of morality and illusion of unanimity.

2.2 Quality of decision-making

The topic of the quality of decision-making steps and outcomes is older than groupthink. It has attracted considerable research interest in both organization and management studies. Authors of the field agree on two main things; 1) different processes lead to different outcomes and 2) different decisions lead to different consequences (Dean & Sharfman, 1996). As far as this research is concerned, the quality of decision-making refers to the quality of the process by which the groups make decisions, and not the decision outcomes. Accordingly, a process is effective if it is transparent, participative and rational.

One aspect of the quality decision-making processes is transparency. Groups can achieve transparency when the relevant decision-making structure is clear, roles and responsibilities are assigned and clarified and information regarding the choices and decision outcomes are easily attainable by the concerned parties. A transparent decision-making process is can enhance both the process and the outcomes (Schreider, et al., 2010).

The second aspect of a good quality decision-making process is participative decision-making (PDM). PDM refers to the decision-making process by which individuals and groups secure their interests or contribute to the choice process through suggesting and pushing for courses of action they see right (Heller, Pusic, Strauss, & Wilpert, 1998). PDM is achieved when all the stakeholders of the decision can take part in its making and when the group discusses their ideas and concerns hoping to reach unanimous decisions.

Rationality is the last aspect of a good quality decision-making process considered in the current research. Full rationality is a structured model of decision-making that depends on a perfect knowledge of the alternative courses of action and their consequences. This, however, is deemed impossible by Simon (1979) who proposed bounded rationality theory. According to this idea, humans satisfice with the limitations they think they have and decide accordingly. In addition, the dual-processing theories of decision-making argues that the limitation in rational decision-making should be filled by the intuitive decision-making approach (Motl, Krieshok, & Multon, 2017). As such, a good quality decision-making process comprises correlated steps that encourage using both rationality and intuition, considers the business environment and contemplates every option and weights its advantages and disadvantages.

The first authors who studied the link between groupthink and the quality of decisions were Janis and his colleague (1977). The link between the quality of decisions and groupthink and between the antecedents and symptoms of groupthink, just like the original idea has attracted a lot of researchers. Some academicians have approved all of the initial claims. Examples of such efforts include Morgan (1986), Sims (1992), Esser (1995) and Badie (2010). More recently, Baron (2005) achieved similar results while proposing different terminology for what we could consider the same phenomenon. Others have concluded that only some symptoms of groupthink are significantly related to inferior decision-making processes and outcomes. For example, Thompson and Carsrud (1976) found a positive link between the illusion of the group's invulnerability, one symptom of groupthink, and defective decision-making. Also, Park (2000) confirmed that all of the symptoms, except for the illusion of the group's invulnerability and absolute belief in-group morality, can lead to lower quality decision-making processes.

Research methods

3.1 Research questions
This research is trying to answer the following questions:
3.1.1 What is the degree of groupthink tendency among the sample of college committees **this**

Research Studies?

3.1.2 Do the demographic factors affect groupthink tendency?

3.1.3 How is the quality of the decision-making process in those committees?

3.1.4 Do the demographic factors affect the quality of the decision-making process?

3.1.5 Is there any significant relationship between the two variables of the current research?

3.2 Research hypothesis

To prove that a good decision-making process alone cannot guarantee the absence of groupthink tendencies, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H0: There is a statistically significant negative covariance between the quality of the decision-making process and groupthink tendency.

H1: There is a statistically significant negative covariance between the quality of the decision-making process and groupthink tendency.

We assume that this relationship is not negative, meaning that enhancing the quality of the decision-making process according to the traditional approaches alone cannot uproot the tendency of groups to fall victims to groupthink.

3.3 Research approach

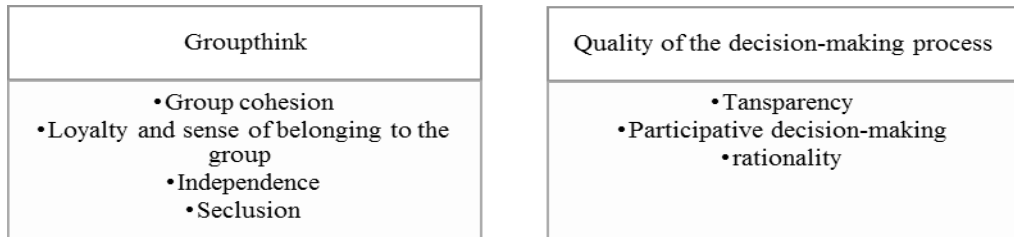The following figure explains the approach used in this research:

Figure 1: the research approach

3.4 Research methods

This research used self-reported questionnaires distributed among a number of (n=67) college committee members of several public universities in Kurdistan region of Iraq. The questionnaires were divided into two main sections beside the demographic information section. The first section was designed to capture the respondents' opinions regarding the antecedents of groupthink in their decision-making process. This section was divided into four sub-sections including group cohesion, sense of belonging to the group, group independence and group seclusion as depicted in Figure 1. Participants were asked to rate their responses to statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to 4 statements per each subsection.

The second section of the questionnaire forms was dedicated to checking the quality of the decision-making process as shown in Figure 1. This section was divided into three subsections namely transparency of the decision-making process, PDM and rationality. Each subsection comprised four different statements. Similar to section one, the committee members were asked to choose their responses to the statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Then, the researchers entered the data from the questionnaires to spreadsheets for analysis. First, to understand the nature of the variables, the descriptive statistics of the participants' answers to the 28 statements were calculated. Higher means with low standard deviations meant higher existence of the measured antecedents of groupthink in section one and a better quality of the decision-making process in section two.

To check for the correlations, covariances and their significance, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient, ANOVA and regression tests were used at an alpha level of .05, because these tests were judged appropriate by the researchers.

3.5 Necessary definitions

Groupthink is the failure of one or more group members to realistically state and evaluate alternative courses of action other than that considered by the group itself.

Decision-making quality refers to the quality of the process by which the decisions are made.

4. Discussions and findings

4.1 First: Sample description

The college committees of the public universities have been chosen as the focus of this research, as those permanent and top management groups are judged suitable for testing the variables by the researchers.

Most of our respondents seem of high profiles. As, around 90% of them hold one or more post-graduate degrees. Similarly, they have obtained high academic titles. For example, more than 37% of them have a professorship and assistant professorship and around 24% of them were lecturers. The prestigious academic titles of our respondents are coupled with long years of experience as members

of their top management committees. For, as much as 58.2% of them have served in their positions for 6-10 years straight.

To come up with verifiable conclusions, we will first discuss the likelihood of groupthink among the studied sample of top management teams at public sector universities in Kurdistan. The evaluation of the quality of decision-making processes will follow this among the same groups. Finally, we will test the relationship between the two sets of variables.

4.2 Groupthink among teams of top managers at Kurdistan's public universities
4.2.1 Group cohesion

The studied sample shows a strong cohesion among members of college committees. As, over 80% of the respondents claim the existence of strong social ties amongst the members of those groups with each member considered to have a distinct place in the group. 66% are confident that those ties are so strong that disagreements arising from different judgments and opinions cannot weaken them.

As group cohesion is the primary antecedent of groupthink without which all other factors are irrelevant, this strong cohesion among our studied sample indicates a great possibility for groupthink and allows us to analyze the other antecedents.

4.2.2 Loyalty and sense of belonging

Loyalty to the group is another reason behind groupthink, as members loyal to their peers might avoid arguments that could weaken the existing strong ties among the group members. This leaves many options and decisions understudied at best. The results show that loyalty and sense of belonging to the team appear very high among the groups of the public universities' top managers.

The results prove the majority's pride in being a part of the groups they belong to and a little less than 70% even claim to put the wellbeing of the group before their very own interests. Also, members seem to have little doubt that all other members share a similar sense of loyalty and belonging. That is probably why over 66% of the respondents display a blind trust in their peers' judgments and believe that if the committee makes a unanimous decision, that decision is absolutely right. This blind trust is another symptom of groupthink.

4.2.3 Independence

From the responses, it becomes clear that members of most of the committees studied believe that their group is unique with a set of objectives distinct from every other group. Similarly, 61% of them show their trust in their committee's independence. Not just that, but 64% of them believe their committee to be the leader of their environment, while only under 8% believe otherwise, the rest being unsure. These results coupled with the openness results discussed hereinafter are interpreted as high seclusion, meaning that the college committees are very independent leading to a higher possibility of groupthink.

4.2.4 Seclusion

Our analyses reveal that the majority of those groups are reluctant, and uninterested at best, to admit new members. Even when new members are added to the group, it is very unlikely that the newcomer will have any fast and significant contribution to the group discussions by the virtue of group cohesiveness discussed above. Moreover, most of the members display that their committees do not consider opinions outside of their immediate circles. Also, over 62% of these committees prevent outsider participation in their meetings, even when the issue being discussed is related to the outsider in question. This seclusion can have a negative impact on the group's ability to generate and discuss novel ideas and approaches. In turn, this can lead to a higher possibility of committing groupthink.

When the members are loyal to a cohesive and unique group that is not open to newcomers and external perspective, that group is prone to committing groupthink. Our analyses show exactly that; teams consisting of the top managers of the public universities in Kurdistan are secluded, very

cohesive, highly independent and unique. Therefore, we can settle our first research question and conclude the existence of the prerequisites of groupthink among such groups.

To answer our second research question; the ANOVA results shown in Table 1 reveal no statistically significant relationship between the demographic factors of the decision-makers and the existence of the groupthink symptoms. The only exception seems to be education. Higher education and a higher tendency to groupthink seem to covary at an effect size of 22%. This supports the argument that higher education, more experience and prestigious academic titles do not reduce the chances of groupthink.

Demographic factors (Independent variables)	Groupthink tendency (Dependent variable)
Gender	P:.985 Partial Eta^2:.000
Age	P:.430 Partial Eta^2:.043
Experience	P:.100 Partial Eta^2:.094
Education	P:.001 Partial Eta^2:.022
Academic title	P:.922 Partial Eta^2:.008
Committee experience	P:.987 Partial Eta^2:.002

Table 1: ANOVA output: demographic factors and groupthink tendency

Quality of decision-making process among teams of top managers at Kurdistan's public universities

As we have argued hereinabove, the quality of the decision-making process is adequate when the process is transparent, stakeholder engagement is actively encouraged, and rational decision-making process is promoted.

4.3.1 Transparency

Results show that the decision-making process used by the top management committees of the public universities in Kurdistan is highly transparent. The majority claim that the process is clear (76.1%), relevant information about the problems and decision outcomes is clear and attainable (65.7%) and the decisions and their outcomes will be communicated to the stakeholders beforehand (77.6%). This means that the process fulfills one criterion set to test the quality of the decision-making process.

4.3.2 Participation

The answers by the committee members show that all relevant parties can take part in the decision-making process. Moreover, 77.7% of the respondents claim active encouragement of differences in ideas and perspectives. However, these two claims contradict their statement that access to meetings to be exclusive only to the committee members and their claim they try to do without the outsiders' effect on their judgments as concluded above. Furthermore, a little less than 75% believe a big portion of their decisions is made unanimously. According to the analysis above, the studied environment is

a good incumbent for groupthink, therefore this unanimity might be just an illusion. Yet, it also reveals that the decision-making process is participative to a high degree.

4.3.3 Rational and analytical thinking

According to the analyzed data; members of the college committees in the public universities of Iraqi Kurdistan are rational in their decision-making processes. For, over 70% of them claim to take analytically calculated steps towards rational decisions. Furthermore, more than three-quarters of the respondents claim considering the business environment throughout the process. They also claim that they weight the advantages and disadvantages of every course of action and its outcomes during the making of the decisions. These analyses show that the decision-making process in the Kurdistan Region's public sector universities is of great quality. The analysis of the collected data shows that the process is highly transparent, collaborative and rational. This answers our research question number three. Unlike the tendency to groupthink, the quality of the process by which decisions are made is affected by the demographic factors to a larger degree, as presented in Table 2. The answer to our fourth research question puts forward some interesting findings. First, there is no significant covariance between the gender and the age of the team members and the quality of the decision-making process. This proves that the decision-makers' gender and age do not contribute to the quality of the process. Likewise, academic experience, denoted by the academic title, and years spent on board of the specific committee are insignificant indicators of the quality of the decision-making process. On the contrary, longer general work experience seems to lead to improving the quality at a covariance coefficient of 11.6%. Finally, higher levels of education covary with a better-quality decision-making process at a $\eta p2 = 0.18$ and a significance level of 0.006.

Demographic factors (Independent variables)	Decision-making process quality (Dependent variable)
Gender	P:.572 Partial Eta^2:.005
Age	P:.062 Partial Eta^2:.256
Experience	P:.050 Partial Eta^2:.116
Education	P:.006 Partial Eta^2:.180
Academic title	P:.295 Partial Eta^2:.057
Committee experience	P:.230 Partial Eta^2:.066

Table 2: ANOVA output: demographic factors and decision-making process quality

Finally, the linear regression analysis results reveal a covariance at a significance level of 0.000 between the two main variables of this study. Also, results show an R-value of 0.536 and an adjusted R squared value of 0.276. This means that the relationship is both positive and strong at 27.6%.

Consequently, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative and conclude that having a good quality decision-making process alone does not drive groupthink antecedents away.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research was conducted hoping to find answers to some important questions regarding groupthink and decision-making. The questions included the likelihood of the existence of the groupthink symptoms among the well-educated top managers of the public sector universities of Kurdistan Region of Iraq and whether this is correlated with the demographic profile of the managers. It also tried to find out about the quality of the decision-making process and its correlation with the profile of the members of those teams. The researchers hypothesized that high profile teams of the college committees of the public universities can fall victims of groupthink too.

The research concluded that groupthink prerequisites such as high cohesion, seclusion, independence and team loyalty exist in the studied teams whose members are of high academic backgrounds. This inference is held true regardless of the members' gender, age, experience and academic background mix. Therefore, we concluded that avoiding groupthink cannot be done simply by changing the demographics of a team's members. Instead, this research recommends opening the teams up to new perspectives from without, developing effective group norms and active encouragement of diversity while keeping cohesion and loyalty under check.

It also concluded that the decision-making process is effective quality wise. And, there is a significant covariance between some demographic factors of the team members such as experience and education level and the quality of the process. Consequently, the researchers recommend supplementing the quality of the decision-making process with persons who have more general work experience and higher academic certificate. But these competent decision-makers need not stay in the college committees for a long period, because having longer committee experience doesn't contribute to the quality of the decision-making process. Moreover, teams are advised to promote transparency and active engagement of every team member. Additionally, the decision-making process needs to be rational enough in a way that allows for intuitive decisions too.

Finally, the research concluded a significantly positive covariance between the decision-making process's quality and the symptoms of groupthink. This suggests that avoiding groupthink takes more than the improvement of the process by which decisions are made. Therefore, the researchers recommend a critical thinking organizational culture in which individuals and groups are actively encouraged to scrutinize the decisions even when made unanimously. One such way could be by asking one or more members of your team to prepare the strongest case against the seemingly unanimously approved course of action. Finally, leaders should not haste into revealing their points of view until after the team has discussed all the choices.

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