Perspectivas – *Portuguese Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, N.º 11, December 2013, 31-53

Group-sharing, not Groupthink: Understanding Foreign Policy Decision-Making through a Social Sharedness Approach

Luís da Vinha

Luis da Vinha
Department of International Relations
University of Coimbra, Portugal
luisvinhas@ces.uc.pt

ISSN 1646-2157 (print)

ABSTRACT:
The concept of groupthink has dominated much of group research in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). However, groupthink's success and proliferation in academic and popular circles has led to some general misinterpretations of the concept itself. While Janis' groupthink concept has received a wide amount of attention throughout the years, it has also been subject to various strands of criticism. In fact, groupthink's broad popularity has not been based on the success of research findings. Also, groupthink challenges much of the research of social psychology undertaken in recent decades which reveals that particular group dynamics can actually contribute to more efficient decision-making. In this paper we seek to demystify the groupthink

Introduction

The refutation of the rational paradigm employed in explaining foreign policy decisions opened several new avenues of inquiry and led to the advent of alternative explanatory frameworks (e.g., bureaucratic and organizational models, small group politics, and individual leaders). In the last decades, psychological approaches have been especially relevant for foreign policy analysis (FPA). Psychologically-oriented research centres on individual actors and their collective interactions in group settings. However, most of the research carried out under the cognitive research agenda has focused predominantly on isolated individual actors.

While the importance of small group decision-making has long been acknowledged in FPA (Kowert, 2002; Stern and Sundelius, 1997; 't Hart et al., 1997), very little empirical research has been carried out. In fact, Janis' concept of groupthink has dominated much of the group research in FPA. Ever since groupthink was conceptualised four decades ago, it has occupied the centre stage of scholarly inquiry on group decision-making ('t Hart, 1991). Its success can be attested to by its proliferation throughout numerous disciplines within the social sciences (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). It has become, according to 't Hart et al. (1997: 11), 'a standard item in textbooks in social psychology, organization and management, and public policy-making'.

Ultimately, Janis challenged the traditional assessment of social psychology which argued that group cohesion contributes to an enhanced decision-making process (George, 1997). According to Janis, groupthink results from extreme forms of group cohesiveness which have a detrimental effect on the decision-making process. The success of groupthink in academic and popular circles has consolidated a generalised judgment that associates group dynamics with faulty decisions.

Despite being subject to rigorous criticism throughout the years, groupthink continues to permeate widespread popular and academic rationales. One example of particular significance is the US Senate's Committee on Intelligence assessment on the pre-war intelligence on Iraq. Of the numerous conclusions outlined in the report, the Committee determined that

The Intelligence Community (IC) suffered from a collective presumption that Iraq had an active and growing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program. This "group think" dynamic led Intelligence Community analysts, collectors and managers to both interpret ambiguous evidence as conclusively indicative of a WMD program as well as ignore or minimize evidence that Iraq did not have

active and expanding weapons of mass destruction programs. This presumption was so strong that formalized IC mechanisms established to challenge assumptions and group think were not utilized. (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004: 18)

Other, more academically oriented reviews, have endorsed similar claims (Badie, 2010; Houghton, 2008; McQueen, 2005; Nantais, 2009). For instance, Badie (2010: 278) attributes the Bush Administration´s foreign policy change to the groupthink phenomenon, which 'spurred by 9/11, directed a shift in the administration´s view: Saddam Hussein was no longer just a troubling dictator, he came to represent an existential threat to US security'.

In this paper we seek to demystify the groupthink phenomenon and present an alternate assessment of group dynamics in foreign policy decision-making. We argue in favour of adopting a social cognition approach which can advance our understanding of how decision-making groups define the particular challenges that they face in the international political environment. More precisely, we present a conceptual framework based on social sharing mechanisms for comprehending how groups develop the problem representations[1] that inform their foreign policy decisions.

Accordingly, in the following sections we assess the groupthink process identifying its main features and dynamics. Subsequently, we identify the major critiques and shortcomings in the groupthink theory. We then focus our attention on the major breakthroughs in social psychology, namely centring on the research carried out on social cognition, arguing in favour of embracing its hindsight in order to achieve a better understanding of the group dynamics involved in foreign policy decision-making.

phenomenon and present an alternative assessment of group dynamics in foreign policy decision-making. We argue in favour of adopting a social cognition approach which can advance our understanding of how decision-making groups define the particular challenges that they face in the international political environment. More precisely, we present a conceptual framework based on social sharing mechanisms for comprehending how groups develop the problem representations that inform their foreign policy decisions. Ultimately, we seek to highlight the positive contributions of group dynamics in effective decision-making.

KEY-WORDS:
Group decision-making, groupthink, integration process, social psychology, social sharing.

Groupthink's Central Tenets

Groupthink's widespread acceptance in academic and popular circles has led to some general misinterpretations of the concept *per se*. As George (1997: 37) has pointed out, there has been a vulgarisation and stretching of the original concept which has, for example, created a 'tendency to redefine concurrence-seeking to include any and all efforts to obtain consensus and support within the group'. This inclination to stretch the meaning of groupthink has certainly not helped to understand the group dynamics involved in foreign policy decision-making. Thus, we must begin by defining groupthink in accordance with Janis' original

conceptualisation in order to understand its actual effect and extent on group decision-making.

We can begin by framing groupthink within the broad psychological research paradigm in FPA. More specifically, groupthink can be associated with the research on group processes, particularly with its emphasis on small group formation and dynamics ('t Hart, 1991). Succinctly, groupthink can be described as an outcome of an extreme concurrence-seeking process formed within a cohesive decision-making group. From this perspective, excessive concurrence-seeking obfuscates realistic evaluations of the different alternatives available to decision-makers. Therefore, due to the 'deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgement that results from in-group pressures' (Janis, 1983: 9), the policy options chosen will naturally be defective.

In this sense, Janis placed considerable emphasis on the emotional factors involved in decision-making. Particularly significant is the role of stress. Thus, highly demanding situations place great anxiety on individual group members who consequently tend to find comfort and assurance through affiliation with the other members of the group. As George (1997) has quite clearly pointed out, stress is a crucial factor underlying the process of groupthink. It is precisely the severe decisional stress which decision-makers occasionally encounter that leads them to reinforce their cohesion within the group. Cohesiveness is, according to Janis an essential cause of conformity. However, contrary to other forms of cohesiveness which actually unshackle group constraints

The groupthink type of conformity tends to increase as group cohesiveness increases. Groupthink involves nondeliberate suppression of critical thoughts as a result of internalization of the group's norms… The more cohesive the group, the greater the inner compulsion on the part of each member to avoid creating disunity, which inclines him to believe in the soundness of whatever proposals are promoted by the leader or by a majority of the group's members. (Janis, 1971: 85)

In effect, Janis (1983) defined a host of antecedent conditions – i.e., contextual causes – facilitating groupthink, which are divided into three individual categories: 1) high level of group cohesiveness; 2) structural faults of the organisation; and 3) provocative situational context. In the case of the structural faults of the organisation (condition number 2), Janis emphasized several characteristics of the group's organisational context such as group isolation, lack of traditional and impartial leadership, lack of norms requiring methodical procedures, and homogeneity of

members' social background and ideology. As for the provocative situational context (condition number 3), the role of the stress factors are reinforced along with the existence of a low self-esteem in the group brought about by recent failures, excessive difficulties on current decision-making or moral dilemmas. Nevertheless, Janis did not attribute identical credence to these three conditions. The provocative situational context received pre-eminence in explaining groupthink. In contrast, Janis' (1983: 301) 'explanatory hypothesis implicitly assigns a secondary role to the structural faults of the organization'.

As a result, Janis (1971; 1983) identified eight main symptoms of groupthink, divided into three main types, which are self-reinforcing. These symptoms comprise the observable results of the groupthink phenomenon and are illustrated in Table 1. The first symptom is the illusion of invulnerability shared by group members which encourages high degrees of risk-taking. Directly associated with the former symptom is the unwavering belief in the groups moral righteousness. The unquestionable belief in the group's moral virtues can lead to a disregard for any ethical or moral consequences related to their decision. An additional symptom of groupthink is the group's effort to rationalise the existence or surfacing of warnings or dissonant information. This rationalisation process allows the group to discount these dissonances and avoid revaluating their existing assumptions and beliefs. Another closed-minded symptom is stereotyping. This implies that the group develops stereotyped images of its adversaries – e.g., too evil to negotiate with or too weak to deal with the situation – and, therefore, does not consider all the complex dimensions inherent in the adversaries actions and decisions.

The subsequent four symptoms all fall into the assemblage of pressures toward uniformity. One particular symptom is self-censorship which constrains individual members from deviating from an apparent group consensus. From this perspective individual members conceal their doubts and even minimize the relevance of their uncertainties. As a consequence of the self-censorship, a shared illusion of unanimity is formed within the group. This symptom is reinforced by the assumption that the absence of any expressed doubt or dispute during the discussion implies that there is complete concurrence between all the members' views. An additional symptom is the pressure applied to any individual member who displays any doubts or hesitations regarding the group's dominant opinions and options. This pressure seeks to deny any dissent in the group, therefore reinforcing the concurrence-seeking norm. Lastly, groupthink enables the surfacing of self-appointed mindguards whose sense of duty is to protect the group from unfavourable and

conflicting information and views that might shatter the group's self-assurance about the effectiveness and morality of its decisions.

Table 1 – Symptoms of groupthink

I. Overestimation of the group's power and morality
1) Invulnerability
2) Morality
II. Closed-mindedness
3) Rationale
4) Stereotypes
III. Pressures toward uniformity
5) Self-censorship
6) Unanimity
7) Pressure
8) Mindguards

(Source: adapted from Janis, 1971, 1983)

The outcomes brought on by these symptoms are, according to Janis, naturally defective decisions resulting from a mediocre decision-making process. More specifically, Janis (1971, 1983) identified seven consequences (or defects) derived from groupthink. The first is an incomplete survey of alternative policy options. Rather than examine a wide variety of choices, the group limits its policy choices (generally to one or two options only). The second consequence is an inadequate assessment of the objectives to be achieved, as well as the values associated with those objectives. Thirdly, there is the failure to examine the risks of the preferred choice. In other words, even after learning of possible risks and shortcomings of the policy selected, the group does not reconsider its options. The fourth defect is the inability to reconsider initially rejected alternatives. The fifth consequence results in a poor information search. In this case, the group rebuffs any attempt to widen their sources of information in order to re-examine the situation and

new alternatives. The sixth result is a bias towards information and processes which (re)confirm the group's initial policy option; i.e., divergent information and evidence is repudiated. The last defective consequence is a lack of contingency planning. As a result, the group lacks a way of responding to possible setbacks or derailments of the initial policy choice.

Critiques of Groupthink

While Janis' groupthink concept has received a wide amount of attention throughout the years, it has also been subject to various strands of criticism. In fact, groupthink's broad popularity has not been based on the success of research findings. Accordingly, while the concept has significantly flourished in the field of political science, especially in International Relations, 't Hart et al. (1997: 12) argue that it has solely served to reinforce the prevalent tendencies which 'cling to a negatively biased view of groups, forgoing an impressive body of evidence detailing the many positive aspects of group behaviour'.

One of the initial critiques was levelled at methodology. Janis' research strategy was biased in the sense that it began by analysing cases which had been labelled policy failures. In other words, Janis has been criticised for selecting on the dependent variable. According to 't Hart (1991: 268), this 'methodology places a high premium on the objectivity of the analyst to withstand (unconscious) biases towards selective interpretation of the case study material'. Equally troubling is the fact that this approach is conducive to circular assertions, i.e., groupthink is deduced from policy failures and these failures are explained through groupthink.

Despite this methodological shortcoming, the main disparagement of groupthink is related to the scant empirical evidence to support it. In an overview of the empirical research conducted in the two and a half decades since the original presentation of the groupthink concept, Turner and Pratkanis (1998) found that there have been very few laboratory and case studies in which the full assemblage of groupthink effects were confirmed. In fact, contrary to common perception, 'few experimental studies have documented the end result and the hallmark of groupthink: the low quality, defective decisions' (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998: 110). Since then, few studies have applied the groupthink analysis to government decision-making. On the other hand, much of the groupthink research that has been carried out has not followed Janis' original conceptualisation. Nor has it been operationalised according to the original model (Fuller and Aldag, 1997).

One of the apparent reasons for the lack of research is the difficulty in empirically observing concurrence seeking (George, 1997). In fact, small group decision-making has generally proved difficult to assess. Gaenslen (1992) has attributed the lack of research on foreign policy-making groups to the difficulty in studying them. Some of these difficulties are due to reservations about the source of the information relevant to studying group decision-making. The reliability of archival materials detailing how groups make foreign policy decisions has been questioned on various points. First, the accuracy and veracity of the textual and verbal accounts can always be subject to image-management concerns. Second, the context in which group decision-making is made is not always clear and explicit to researchers (Stern and Sundelius, 1997). The third problem concerns the incomplete nature of archival materials. As Gaenslen (1992) has cautioned, not everything that happens in a meeting is registered and many times discussions relevant to the decisions are conducted in informal settings that escape any possibility of verification. I would add that another major difficulty in analysing group foreign policy decision-making is epistemological. As argued ahead, foreign policy decision-making has privileged an individual-oriented approach to its research.

In the case of groupthink, the ambivalent nature of the antecedent conditions and groupthink's subsequent consequences have hindered the operationalization of variable coding and testing. Even when the groupthink analysis has been applied to particular cases of group decision-making findings are not consistent with its fundamental assumptions. In a recent review of over sixty scholarly peer-reviewed articles examining groupthink, Rose (2011) concluded that there is still a considerable amount of ambiguity concerning the use and value of using the concept. More disquieting for the theoretical strength of Janis' conceptualisation is the fact that groupthink can occur even without the existence of the initial antecedent conditions (Aldag and Fuller, 1993; Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). Furthermore, many of the symptoms of groupthink can be identified in processes that result in high quality decision outcomes ('t Hart, 1991). On the other hand, defective decision-processes can ultimately result in sound policy results. In other words, to attain a good decision it is not always necessary to carry out a thorough canvassing of the problems, information and options (George, 1997).

Also, the relationship established by Janis between stress and group cohesion has faltered under much empirical scrutiny. According to 't Hart (1991: 254), 'laboratory research has made it clear that there is no simple and clear-cut linkage between external stress and increased group cohesiveness'. Moreover, while much

of the research in social psychology does confirm that group cohesion reinforces member´s compliance to group norms, these need not imply conformity ('t Hart, 1991). In fact, group norms and decision rules may in many cases encourage critical and deviant thinking. Whichever management style and model is adopted by a group will ultimately define whether there is space and opportunity for multiple perspectives and policy proposals (George, 1980). Given the weight that Janis attributed to the connection between stress and cohesion in this theory of groupthink, the lack of evidence to support this premises is disquieting.

The bulk of the criticisms regarding groupthink have led to a variety of different responses from the scholarly community. Turner and Pratkanis (1998) have identified three main reactions: rejection, reformulation, and revitalisation. The first reaction holds that groupthink´s inadequate empirical validation has rendered it useless and the concept should be avoided in decision-making analysis. A second response suggests that the concept's empirical shortcomings may be surpassed by developing a more adequate framework which can contribute to validating the groupthink model (see Rose, 2011). Lastly, a third major response has been an effort to revitalise groupthink analysis. This trend argues that groupthink is useful for explaining group dynamics from both a theoretical and practical perspective. One example is 't Hart's reformulation of the groupthink concept. By redefining 'concurrence seeking' to simply designate an effort to reach a policy consensus within the group, 't Hart tries to separate it from other deviant forms such as 'premature', 'excessive' and 'rigid' concurrence seeking. Nevertheless, as George (1997) has pointed out, this reconceptualising endeavour raises new theoretical issues, specifically about the definition and operationalisation of these new concepts.

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the groupthink model, it should be acknowledged that numerous distinct patterns of group interaction and many different dynamics are involved in the group decision-making process ('t Hart et al., 1997). In addition, we cannot dismiss contextual considerations and decision-making styles when studying foreign policy decision-making. Accordingly, attention must be given to numerous dynamic factors, such as (Stern and Sundelius, 1997):

– Extragroup setting;
– Intragroup setting;
– Group leadership practices;
– Type and level of group cohesion;
– Type and level of group conflict or rivalry.

Moreover, group decision-making need not and should not be accepted as a detrimental process in foreign policy-making. As a matter of fact, numerous studies carried out over the last decades have revealed that certain group dynamics contribute to more efficient decision-making (Cannon-Bowers and Salas, 2001; McComb, 2007; Mohammed et al., 2010). Even Janis (1971: 85) admits that a functional group is likely 'of making better decisions than any individual group member working alone'. The main threat to the group decision-making process is the acquiescence to 'powerful psychological pressures that arise when the members work closely together, share the same set of values and, above all, face a crisis situation that puts everyone under intense stress' (Janis, 1971: 85).

Social cognition and foreign policy decision-making

Besides breaking with traditional assumptions of social psychology, groupthink also challenges much of the research of social psychology undertaken in more recent decades which reveals that particular group dynamics can actually contribute to more efficient decision-making (Cannon-Bowers and Salas, 2001; Mohammed et al., 2010). The possibility of pooling information and experience among group members can improve decision-making, for group 'discussion can perform a corrective function when members individually have incomplete and biased information' (Stasser and Titus, 1985: 1467). In this sense, groups possess a more extensive array of resources than individuals which should permit an enhanced exchange of information. In fact, Janis (1971) acknowledges that functional groups are more likely of making more quality decisions than individuals deciding on their own. The main challenge is to avoid the 'powerful psychological pressures that arise when the members work closely together, share the same set of values and, above all, face a crisis situation that puts everyone under intense stress' (Janis, 1971: 85). Nevertheless, the predominance of the groupthink concept has attributed a negative connotation to group dynamics involved in foreign policy decision-making (Kowert, 2002; 't Hart et al., 1997).

While conceding to the possible limitations involved in group decision-making, recent developments in social psychology provide a more comprehensive approach to understanding the complexity involved in group dynamics. Especially relevant is the importance attributed to socially shared meaning - i.e., social cognition (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993; Echterhoff et al., 2009; Mohammed et al., 2010; Thompson and Fine, 1999; Tindale et al., 2001). Social cognition results from

the social interaction that permits groups of individuals to construct, share, and distribute information and knowledge. These social interactions 'generate shared perceptions, behaviors, and products, including memories, norms, belief systems, and interpretations of shared events and activities' (Thompson and Fine, 1999: 281). Acknowledging cognition as a fundamentally social activity has challenged the conventional wisdom that cognition is exclusively an individual act and placed the group as the primary unit of analysis (Brauner and Scholl, 2000).

Accordingly, groups are currently viewed as information processors capable of encoding, storing and processing sizable amounts of information More specifically, group information processing entails 'the degree to which information, ideas, or cognitive processes are shared, among the group members and how this sharing of information affects both individual- and group-level outcomes' (Hinsz et al., 1997: 43). Central to understanding group information processing is the concept of 'social sharedness'. At the most basic level, 'the concepts "shared" and/or "sharing" are what make group information processing possible, and distinguish it from individual-level information processing' (Tindale and Kameda, 2000: 124). The basic assumption is that 'things that are shared to a greater degree within groups will have greater influence on the relevant group outcomes/responses than those things shared to a lesser extent' (Tindale and Kameda, 2000: 124). In order to understand how sharedness contributes to information processing, we put forward and describe the following the five models: 1) shared preferences; 2) shared information; 3) shared identity; 4) shared metacognition; and 5) shared task representations.

Shared preferences. Research on group decision-making originally focused on the preferences of group members. In these cases, the Social Decision Scheme (SDS) model constituted the prevailing framework for aggregating individual preferences. While SDS models generated a vast amount of research and empirical results, the most consistent finding demonstrated that in group decision processes the majorities/pluralities normally triumph (Tindale et al., 2001). It was accepted that when groups cannot provide an 'optimal' or 'correct' alternative during discussion, the 'correct' alternative was defined by the group consensus established by the larger factions (Tindale and Kameda, 2000). Over the years SDS models have been subject to a great deal of criticism. The development of alternative models, such as Social Judgment Scheme (SJS), seeks to determine how groups reach consensus on a continuous response scale. Like the original SDS model, SJS and other similar models (see Kameda et al., 2003; Kerr and Tindale, 2004; Tindale

and Kameda, 2000) reveal the influence of social sharedness at the preference level by demonstrating that the members which share a particular preference can impose that preference on the group. However, these models have also been criticised for their failure to determine how individual-level preferences perform after a group consensus has been achieved.

Shared information. Information sharing in groups should be understood in accordance with two distinct approaches – i.e., the common knowledge effect and the cognitive centrality of group members. The common knowledge effect owes its recognition to the work of Stasser and Titus (1985), which opened up the field for understanding how shared information affects group decision-making. Contrary to former theories which had postulated that unshared or unique information was determinant to decision-making, Stasser and Titus (1985: 1476) established that 'unshared information will tend to be omitted from discussion and, therefore, will have little effect on members' preferences during group discussion'. In ensuing studies Stasser and Titus (1987) developed an information-sampling model that confirmed that the likelihood of a particular piece of information being recalled by the group during discussion is a function of the number of individuals possessing that same information. Thus, in group discussions, shared information is much more likely to be recalled than unshared information.

The cognitive centrality of group members, for its part, focuses on the way in which information-sharing influences decision-making through its distribution among group members. Thus, an individual's status or power in the group can be determined by the amount of information he shares with the other members. It is argued that the members holding the greatest amount of pooled information will have greater influence over the group decision-making process (Tindale and Kameda, 2000). In studies conducted by Kameda et al. (1997: 305) it was ascertained 'that cognitively central members acquire pivotal power in a group and can exert not-negligible influences on group consensus'. One of the main reasons for the bias attributed to shared information in group decision-making may be the tendency for members to positively evaluate one another when mentioning shared information. In a series of trials, Wittenbaum et al. (1999) demonstrated that shared information is granted greater importance than unshared information because its exchange during discussion serves to validate members' task knowledge. More precisely, individuals who communicate shared information obtain more affirmative evaluations from other members for doing so.

Shared identity. Social identity theory has also become a major focus in small group research. The central assumption is that individuals in a group identify themselves in a similar manner and share a definition of who they are, what attributes they have in common, and how they relate to and contrast with out-groups (Hogg et al., 2004). Essential to understanding social identity is the notion of social categorization because people tend to categorize the social world into in-groups and out-groups which are cognitively represented as prototypes. A prototype, for its part, may be understood as a cognitive representation of a group norm embodied by group membership and defined by member behaviour (Hogg et al., 2004; Hogg and Reid, 2006). Accordingly, by categorizing oneself as a member of a group, an individual implicitly accepts sharing a set of characteristics and behaviours that define his group from others (Bar-Tal, 1998).

Shared metacognition. An additional way in which social sharedness affects the information process is through the knowledge group members have of the extent of sharedness – i.e., metacognition. The majority of the research on social sharedness has centred on the degree to which group members share certain knowledge or information. However, some studies have investigated members' knowledge of what other members know and how the consciousness of the information distribution affects decision-making (Tindale and Kameda, 2000). Particularly significant in this field of investigation is the concept of transactive memory. By adopting an individual-level cognitive template Wegner (1987) argued that groups encode, store, and retrieve information in a manner quite similar to a single individual. Thus, the possibility of group members acting as external storage locations creates a knowledge-storage system that exceeds the individual capacities of the sum of the individual group members. This permits that groups remember much more than individuals. However, a transactive memory system requires that members know who has what information in order to access it. Subsequent studies have corroborated this theory. For example, Moreland (2006) conducted a series of experiments to determine the effect of individual and group training on group performance. The experiments demonstrated that transactive memory can contribute considerably to improve a group's work performance.

Shared task representations. While most of the research mentioned above is devoted to examining specific pieces or types of information and knowledge that group members can share, research has confirmed that group members can share a 'conceptual system of ideas that allows them to realize when a proposed solution is correct within that system' (Kerr and Tindale, 2004: 638). These shared

conceptual systems – i.e., shared task representations – help explain divergences from majority/plurality and other faction-size related models. While majority/plurality models revealed robust results in most experiments, numerous studies demonstrate asymmetric deviations from majority-type processes. Laughlin justified these variations by asserting that in group problem-solving tasks small factions can influence larger factions by promoting the existence of 'demonstrably correct solutions'[2], thus supporting 'truth-wins' or 'truth-supported-wins' decision schemes (Tindale et al., 2001). Laughlin argued that demonstrability was achieved through a system of axioms or beliefs shared among group members. More precisely, 'using the shared belief system for a correct alternative can win out over majorities favoring an incorrect alternative' (Tindale and Kameda, 2000: 129)

The research of Tindale et al. (1996) attested that shared task representations in a group allow for alternatives consistent with that representation to be defended more effortlessly and therefore more prone to prevail as the groups' ultimate collective choice. The authors (Tindale et al., 1996: 84) defined a shared representation as 'any task/situation relevant concept, norm, perspective or cognitive process that is shared by most or all of the group members'. By attributing task relevancy to the shared representation it is inferred that it will 'have some implication for the choice alternatives involved' (Tindale et al., 1996: 84). In other words, the shared task representations can influence the decision-making process as well as the final outcome.

It is usually believed that sharing task representations breeds beneficial effects on the group decision-making process (Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994; van Ginkel et al., 2009; van Ginkel and van Knippenberg, 2008). By involving group members in a discussion of the group's tasks and goals – i.e. 'reflexivity' – it is expected that individual members will become aware of the differences amongst the various representations in the group. Once these differences are acknowledged group members can try to reconcile them and develop more shared and task appropriate representations (van Ginkel et al., 2009). As a result, 'if all the members of a group share a knowledge or belief system that lends credence to a particular alternative, that alternative becomes easier to defend in a group discussion' (Tindale et al., 1996: 86).

The correspondence between the concepts of shared task representation and problem representation is considerable. While sufficiently straightforward, we should understand a problem representation as a 'mental model that includes a label for the problem, some ideas about why the problem occurred and how it

might be solved, and a prediction what will happen if the problem is ignored' (Moreland and Levine, 1992: 21). The importance of problem representations for foreign policy-decision-making has been thoroughly scrutinized. In other words, it has long been accepted that the problem representation determines subsequent actions (Sylvan, 1998; Taber, 1998; Vertzberger, 2002; Voss, 1998). Thus, it is assumed that the problem representation shapes decision-making since 'the kinds of alternative solutions that are developed for a problem and the ways in which those solutions are evaluated and implemented depend on how the problem is diagnosed by group members' (Moreland and Levine, 1992: 21). Hence, when a problematic state of affairs arises in international politics, decision-makers develop a problem representation according to their knowledge and beliefs (Beasley, 1998; Voss, 1998). This representation is an essential part of the information processing stage of foreign policy decision-making.

Converging shared problem representations from the individual to the group

Traditional cognitive approaches to problem representation in FPA have tended to focus predominantly on individual decision-makers. When collective problem representations have been explored they have relied on aggregation techniques. In other words, aggregation focuses on measuring individual group member knowledge and averaging the results across the group (Cooke et al., 2007). Yet, this method not only approaches the group as a homogenous unit, but, more importantly, fails to highlight the important influence of social interaction and communication between group members (Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994; Mohammed et al., 2010). Aggregating presumes that the individual members are autonomous actors and that the relations between group members are unrelated to the final output. In contrast, a social cognition approach argues that the relations established between the different members of the group are essential to the outcome. Rather than the sum of the parts, we must understand how the individual interactions between group members construct new and alternative representations.

In this sense, we need to understand how individual's problem representations converge and are shared through the interaction among group members. McComb (2007) developed a three-phase framework for demonstrating the convergence process for mental models and which can be applied to the present argument: 1) orientation; 2) differentiation; and 3) integration. The framework allows for an

understanding of how individuals focused on their own goals and objectives can work together as a team and create shared mental representations that contribute to their activities.

The convergence process should be understood as a bottom-up procedure. In other words, shared cognition always develops from individual cognition. It is the interaction between the different individuals that allows for cognition to converge between group members (Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994; McComb, 2007; Mohammed et al., 2010). Thus the framework suggests that individuals only bring their own singular cognitive representations to the group at the initial stage. It is precisely the conversion process that allows for cognition to develop at the group level.

The conversion process follows the same three-phase process regardless of the time and speed that characterises different groups' interactions. Accordingly, the initial phase is the orientation stage in which group members collect new information and gather unshared information about the group through observation, experimentation, and investigation. This interaction allows individual members to accumulate group-relevant information and knowledge which was undisclosed beforehand. As a result, group members exchange information with one another in a manner comparable to individual information retrieval from memory. Thus, the initial orientation process should be understood as 'a collective induction process, in which information – in the form of ideas, knowledge, and strategy – is disseminated among all members' (McComb, 2007: 105).

There are a variety of different means through which group members can exchange information. The most simple is through verbal articulation which permits group members to collect unshared information. However, individuals have a propensity to discuss the information which is most widespread between the group members. Therefore, in addition to verbal articulation, individuals obtain information through observation, experimentation, and inquiry. Regardless of the manner of acquiring information, individual members must also have knowledge of the differences amongst themselves. This implies that group members must achieve an understanding of how the other members of the group interpret the information exchanged and what meaning they attribute to the differences of interpretation. Therefore, the orientation phase allows for a comprehensive understanding of the group situation and 'represents the foundation upon which the remaining convergence process rests and facilitates the emergence of the most complete mental models possible' (McComb, 2007: 106).

Next, the differentiation phase sorts, consolidates, arranges, and stores the information previously collected, producing a transactive memory system that can be accessed when necessary. While the information organised refers to the group, McComb (2007: 107) recalls that 'the focal level remains the individual because the content is the team members' perspectives, which may or may not be shared across team members at this point in the convergence process'. This stage is crucial since it is essential for each individual member to acknowledge the diverse perspectives about the information collected held by each other member. Thus, this process is comparable to the creation of a transactive memory system. As described above, individual members possess their own individual knowledge about a situation as well as a directory of the information held by the other members of the group. Accordingly, through the sharing of storage responsibilities amongst members a meta-knowledge system is created.

The final stage of the convergence process – i.e., integration – requires the resolution of the differences between individual perspectives and the shifting of the focal point to the group as a whole. In other words, 'similarities, differences and irrationalities are reconciled and the individual's internal representations of the world change from an individual perspective to a team perspective' (Kennedy and McComb, 2010: 342). This stage is concluded when the group achieves a level of integration which allows it to perform its task successfully. As expected, the level of integration affects group performance. For example, when integration is not sufficiently accomplished the group may not perform up to their optimal capability due to the lack of information and knowledge between members. In contrast, too much integration may hinder decision-making by facilitating group think. The conversion process is critical in determining the power that shared representations have in influencing the decision-making process. It is fundamental to the construction of the 'reality' framing the group's decision, for as Moscovici (1988: 230) has put it, 'there is no social or psychological reality "as such", no transparent image of events or persons unconnected with the person who creates the image'.

The role of language as a means of communication and interaction is essential to the convergence process and creation of the group representation. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to describe the role of communication on cognition, we should emphasize that research on group communication and cognition has acknowledged that group members 'must communicate to establish shared internal representations if the group is to effectively evaluate and use all of

its members' informational resources' (Kennedy and McComb, 2010: 347). Thus, it is precisely through communication (verbal and non-verbal) that individuals in a group interact to create shared meanings (see Keyton et al., 2010). According to Fiore and Salas (2004: 241) communication produces group cognition by '"sharpening" individual cognition into a well-sculptured whole "product"'. However, while representations arise from communication, the latter are also dependent on representations. In other words, communication is only possible due to representations (Duveen, 2000).

Concluding remarks and observations

Groupthink has become one of the leading buzz words in FPA, especially when focusing on group decision-making. Despite the plethora of conflicting and even contradictory empirical evidence in academic research refuting groupthink, many scholars and non-scholars continue to apply it as a panacea for assessing group dynamics in foreign policy decision-making. The widespread dissemination of the groupthink concept has given group dynamics in foreign policy decision-making a deleterious connotation. Thus, group processes are commonly associated with flawed decisions and defective policies.

Common sense dictates that group dynamics can encompass both benefits and risks. In reality, contemporary research in social psychology highlights the positive contributions of group dynamics to effective decision-making. In this sense, groups provide a wider assortment of resources than individuals which permits an enhanced exchange of information and more efficient decision-making outputs.

Ultimately, Janis (1983) placed considerable emphasis on the quality of the decision-making process. However, as 't Hart (1991) has bluntly pointed out, the debate over the quality of a decision process and outcome is political. What is regarded as a successful or unsuccessful foreign policy outcome is always subject to different value judgments. Depending on the political proclivity of the surveyor, the same policy outcome can be considered an enormous foreign policy accomplishment or an irrefutable failure. Time can also lead us to reconsider foreign policy decisions. Revisionist accounts of foreign policy events surprise us time and time again by overturning traditional accounts of success or failure (see da Vinha, 2010).

Our main objective is not to do away with research on groupthink. On the contrary, there is still much to examine and evaluate in group decision-making and additional inquiries are always welcome. However, we do argue that analysis of

collective decision-making take into account other group dynamics. For instance, a social sharedness approach can help us achieve a better understanding of foreign policy decisions in group settings. Rather than assume that defective decisions result from negative group dynamics, we should try to appreciate other issues underlying the decision-making process. At the end of the day, we should heed Janis' (1971: 85) own admonitions against considering 'that there is anything necessarily inefficient or harmful about group decisions in general'.

REFERENCES

Aldag, Ramon and Sally Fuller. 1993. Beyond Fiasco: A Reappraisal of the Groupthink Phenomenon and a New Model of Group Decision Processes. *Psychological Bulletin* 113 (3): 533-552.

Badie, Dina. 2010. Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror: Explaining Us Policy Shift toward Iraq. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (4): 277-296.

Bar-Tal, Daniel. 1998. Group Beliefs as an Expression of Social Identity. In *Social Identity: International Perspectives*, eds. S. Worchel, J. Morales, D. Paez, and J. Deschamps, 93-113. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Beasley, Ryan. 1998. Collective Interpretations: How Problem Representations Aggregate in Foreign Policy Groups. In *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making*, eds. D. Sylvan and J. Voss, 80-115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brauner, Elisabeth and Wolfgang Scholl. 2000. Editorial: The Information Processing Approach as a Perspective for Groups Research. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 3 (2): 115-122.

Cannon-Bowers, Janis and Eduardo Salas. 2001. Reflections on Shared Cognition. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 22 (2): 195-202.

Cannon-Bowers, Janis, Eduardo Salas and Sharolyn Converse. 1993. Shared Mental Models in Expert Team Decision Making. In *Individual and Group Decision Making: Current Issues*, ed. N. Castellan Jr. 221-246. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Cooke, Nancy, Jamie Gorman and Jennifer Winner. 2007. Team Cognition. In *Handbook of Applied Cognition*, eds. F. Durso, R. Nickerson, S. Dumais and T. Perfect, 239-268. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.

da Vinha, Luis. 2010. Radical Reconstructions: A Critical Analogy of US Post-conflict State-building. *Nação e Defesa* 126 (5): 191-224.

Duveen, Gerard. 2000. Introduction: the Power of Ideas. In *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, eds. S. Moscovici and G. Duveen, 1-17. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Echterhoff, Gerald, Tory Higgins, and John Levine. 2009. Shared Reality: Experiencing Commonality with Others´ Inner States About the World. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 4 (5): 496-521.

Fiore, Stephen and Eduardo Salas. 2004. Why We Need Team Cognition. In *Team Cognition: Understanding the Factors that Drive Process and Performance*, eds. Salas, E and S. Fiore, 235-248. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Fuller, Sally and Ramon Aldag. 1997. Challenging the Mindguards: Moving Small Group Analysis beyond Groupthink. In *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making*, eds. 't Hart, P, E. Sternand B. Sundelius, 55-93. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Gaenslen, Fritz. 1992. Decision-making Groups. In *Political Psychology and Foreign Policy*, eds. E. Singer and Hudson, 165-194. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Publishers.

George, Alexander. 1997. From Groupthink to Contextual Analysis of Policy-making Groups. In *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making*, eds. 't Hart, P, E. Stern and B. Sundelius, 35-54. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

George, Alexander. 1980. *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Hinsz, Verlin, R. Scott Tindale and David Vollrath. 1997. The Emerging Conceptualization of Groups as Information Processors. *Psychological Bulletin* 121 (1): 43-64.

Hogg, Michael, Dominic Abrams, Sabine Otten and Steve Hinkle. 2004. The Social Identity Perspective: Intergroup Relations, Self-Conception, and Small Groups. *Small Group Research* 35 (3): 246-276.

Hogg, Michael and Scott Reid. 2006. Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms. *Communication Theory* 16 (1): 7–30.

Houghton, David. 2008. Invading and Occupying Iraq: Some Insights From Political Psychology. *Peace and Conflict* 14 (2): 169-192.

Janis, Irving. 1983. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Janis, Irving. 1971. Groupthink. *Psychology Today* 5 (6): 84-90.

Kameda, Tatsuya, Yohsuke Ohtsubo and Masonari Takezawa. 1997. Centrality in Sociocognitive Networks and Social Influence: An Illustration in a Group Decision-Making Context. *Journal of Personality and Psychology Study* 73 (2): 296-309.

Kameda, Tatsuya, R. Scott Tindale and James Davis. 2003. Cognitions, Preferences, and Social Sharedness: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Group Decision Making. In *Emerging Perspectives on Judgment and Decision Research*, eds. S. Schneider and J. Shanteau, 458-485. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kennedy, Deanna and Sara McComb. 2010. Merging Internal and External Processes: Examining the Mental Model Convergence Process through Team Communication. *Theoretical Issues in Ergonomics Science* 11 (4): 340-358.

Kerr, Norbert and R. Scott Tindale. 2004. Group Performance and Decision Making. *Annual Review of Psychology* 55: 623-655.

Keyton, Joann, Stephenson Beck and Mary Asbury. 2010. Macrocognition: A Communication Perspective. *Theoretical Issues in Ergonomics Science* 11 (4): 272-286.

Klimoski, Richard and Susan Mohammed. 1994. Team Mental Model: Construct or Metaphor? *Journal of Management* 20 (2): 403-437.

Kowert, Paul. 2002. *Groupthink or Deadlock: When Do Leaders Learn from their Advisors?* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

McComb, Sara. 2007. Mental Model Convergence: The Shift from Being an Individual to Being a Team Member. In Multi-Level Issues in Organizations and Time (Research in Multi Level Issues, Volume 6), eds. F. Dansereau and F. Yammarino, 95-147. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd.

McQueen, Allison. 2005. A Groupthink Perspective on the Invasion of Iraq. *International Affairs Review* 14 (2): 53-79.

Mohammed, Susan; Lori Ferzandi and Katherine Hamilton. 2010. Metaphor No More: A 15-Year Review of the Team Mental Model Construct. *Journal of Management* 36 (4): 876-910.

Moscovici, Serge. 1988. Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18: 211-250.

Moreland, Richard. 2006. Transactive Memory: Learning Who Knows What in Work Groups and Organizations. In *Small Groups: Key Readings*, eds. J. Levine and R. Moreland, 327--346. New York: Psychology Press.

Moreland, Richard and John Levine. 1992. Problem Identification by Groups. In *Group Process and Productivity*, eds. S. Worchel, W. Wood and J. Simpson, 17-47. London: Sage Publications.

Nantais, Joel. 2009. *The Bush Administration's Decision to Invade Iraq: Did They Fall Victim to Groupthink?* Orlando, Florida: University of Central Florida. Unpublished Masters Dissertation.

Rose, James. 2011. Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory – A Literary Review. *Emerging Leadership Journeys* 4 (1): 37-57.

Stasser, Garold and William Titus. 1987. Effects of Information Load and Percentage of Shared Information on the Dissemination of Unshared Information During Group Discussion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53 (1): 81–93.

Stasser, Garold and William Titus. 1985. Pooling of Unshared Information in Group Decision Making: Biased Information Sampling During Discussion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48 (6): 1467–1478.

Stern, Eric and Bengt Sundelius. 1997. Understanding Small Group Decisions in Foreign Policy: Process Diagnosis and Research Procedure. In *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making*, eds. P 't Hart, E. Stern, and B. Sundelius, 123-150. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Sylvan, Donald. 1998. Introduction. In *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making*, eds. D. Sylvan and J. Voss, 3-7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taber, Charles. 1998. The Interpretation of Foreign Policy Events: A Cognitive Process Theory. In *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making*, eds. D. Sylvan and J. Voss, 29-52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

't Hart, Paul. 1991. Irving L. Janis' Victims of Groupthink. *Political Pyschology* 12 (2): 247-278.

't Hart, Paul, Eric Stern and Bengt Sundelius. 1997. Foreign Policy-making at the Top: Political Group Dynamics. In *Beyond Groupthink: Political Group Dynamics and Foreign Policy-making*, eds. P 't Hart, E. Stern, and B. Sundelius, 3-34. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Thompson, Leigh and Gary Fine. 1999. Socially Shared Cognition, Affect, and Behavior: A Review and Integration. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3 (4): 278-302.

Tindale, R. Scott and Tatsuya Kameda. 2000. "Social Sharedness" as a Unifying Theme for Information Processing in Groups. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 3 (2): 123-140.

Tindale, R. Scott, Helen Meisenhelder, Amanda Dykema-Engblade and Michael Hogg. 2001. Shared Cognition in Small Groups. In *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, eds. M. Hogg and R. Tindale, 1-30. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Tindale, R. Scott, Christine Smith, Linda Thomas, Joseph Filkins and Susan Sheffey. 1996. Shared Representations and Asymmetric Social Influence Processes in Small Groups. In *Understanding Group Behavior: Consensual Action by Small Groups*, eds. E. Witte and J. Davis, 81-103. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Turner, Marlene and Anthony Pratkanis. 1998. Twenty-Five Years of Groupthink and Research: Lessons from the Evaluation of a Theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73 (2/3): 105-115.

United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. 2004. *Report on the US Intelligence Community´s Prewar Intelligence Assessment on Iraq*. Washington DC: United States Senate. Available at http://web.mit.edu/simsong/www/iraqreport2-textunder.pdf (accessed 15 March 2012).

van Ginkel, Wendy and Daan van Knippenberg. 2008. Group Information Elaboration and Group Decision Making: The Role of Shared Representations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 105 (1): 82-97.

van Ginkel, Wendy, Daan van Knippenberg and R. Scott Tindale. 2009. Team reflexivity, development of shared task representations, and the use of distributed information in group decision making. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 13 (4): 265-280.

Vertzberger, Yaacov. 2002. *The World in their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Voss, James. 1998. On the Representation of Problems: An Information-Processing Approach to Foreign Policy Decision Making. In *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision Making*, eds. D. Sylvan and L. Voss, 8-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wegner, Daniel. 1987. Transactive Memory: A Contemporary Analysis of the Group Mind. In *Theories of Group Behavior*, eds. B. Hullen and G. Goethal, 185-208. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Wittenbaum, Gwen, Anne Hubbell and Cynthia Zuckerman. 1999. Mutual Enhancement: Toward an Understanding of the Collective Preference for Shared Information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (5): 967-978.

[1] In foreign policy analysis the concept of problem representation is often also referred to as the "definition of the situation". In this paper the term is used interchangeably.

[2] Laughlin distinguished between problem-solving (or intellective) tasks and decision-making tasks. In the former a demonstrably correct solution exists, whereas in the latter 'correctness' is defined by the group consensus (Tindale et al., 2001).