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Unanimity as a Rule For Group Consensus: A Review of the Theoretical and Experimental Literature on the Use of Unanimity in Group Decision-making

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This literature review examines the use of unanimity as a rule for reaching group consensus in decision making. The review contains a brief overview of group decision making and of the processes involved in reaching unanimous decision rule on various group processes and the positive and negative aspects of using this method to reach decisions. From the experimental literature, it appears that unanimous decision rule increases group cohesiveness and commitment to the decision, but at a loss of decision quality. Therefore, the group priorities should be taken into account when considering unanimity as a decision rule.

Group decision making is an important topic in today's dialogue on organizational behavior. In recent years there has been a lot of talk about work groups and group decision making. The increased use of work groups is a result of attempts to empower employees and get them more involved in the organizations that they work for. Popular management theory currently stresses the idea that increased involvement and control over one's job can increase job satisfaction and creativity.

However, work groups are not the only important decision making bodies in organizations, group decision making takes place at all levels. Most organizations are controlled by groups rather than individuals, and these groups must make decisions that will affect the organization more than the decisions made by work groups. Group decisions making may take place in institutionalized settings, such as (a) juries, (b) corporate boards, (c) departmental executive committees, and (d) congressional committees. Group decisions may also be made in ad hoc committees, such as study panels or academic conferences (Davis, 1973). Research on group decision making at all levels of organizations, as well as in experimental settings, is important to gaining as understanding of how to best structure the decision making of groups.

Group Decision Making

Theoretically, there are several reasons why group decision making is superior to individual decision making. The first benefit that can be obtained by group decision making is the increased knowledge and information that can be utilized in the decision process. This is known as a pooling of resources. Making decisions in groups allows a specialization of labor. Members of the group can concentrate on the tasks for which they are best suited. Decisions made by groups are likely to be accepted more readily than decisions made by individuals (Greenberg and Baron, 1995). This may be true because people have a greater trust in a collective decision involving the checks-and-balances of group members rather than the dictatorial pronouncements of a single individual.

While group decisions can be theoretically argued to be superior to
individual decisions, the research on group decision making has led to mixed results. Stasson, Ono, Zimmerman and Davis (1991) found that groups sometimes made higher quality decisions than individuals and sometimes made lower quality decisions. It appears that many factors affect whether individuals or groups will make better decisions on a task. However, group decision making continues to be most commonly used.

Before decisions can be made by groups, the group must have a decision rule in place. The selection of a decision rule clarifies how the decision will be made. There are essentially two types of rules that may be used. These are non-participatory decision rules and participatory rules. Non-participatory decision rules are authoritarian decision rules that specify a particular member of the group as having the power to make decision for the group. Examples of this are rules based on (a) dictatorship, (b) authority or (c) seniority.

On the other hand, participatory decision rules place more emphasis on egalitarianism. One example of this majority rule, in which each member has a vote, and the alternative that gets the most votes becomes the group decision. Another example of a participatory decision rule is unanimity. Under this decision rule, all members of the group must agree on the alternative that is chosen as the group decision (Nielson and Miller, 1992).

**Group Consensus**

Although the words unanimity and consensus may seem redundant, this is actually not the case. Consensus is usually taken to mean an unanimous group decision. However, in the experimental literature, the group decision is often referred to as a consensus as long as a participatory decision rule was used. Therefore, a decision made by majority vote can be described as group consensus just as much as an unanimous decision can be described as group consensus. According to Jefferson (1995), consensus is often used interchangeably with agreement and “simply means that most people in the decision situation agreed on the outcome” (p.1).

Unanimity can be described as a decision reached by the agreement of every group member. When this type of decision rule is used, any individual within the group has the ability to veto a decision (Laing and Slotznick, 1991). Therefore, there is no majority-minority split. All members must either agree to the decision or, depending on what type of consensus is used, abstain from being part of the decision. Unanimity is used in an attempt to ensure that each member approves of the decision and is able to freely commit to the course of action chosen by the group (Schwarz, 1994). In some situations when unanimous decision rule is used, there is some course of action known as the “status quo” that will take place unless the group can come to a unanimous decision (Miller and Anderson, 1979). Therefore, a veto of the group by a minority may still result in action rather than a stalemate. Although no official vote is taken with unanimity. A “straw poll” is often used to enable members to express their preference and get an idea of how close the group is to a unanimous agreement (Davis et al., 1993).
In organizations, unanimous decision rules tend to be used mostly for important decisions. This is because the process of building consensus and agreement is very time consuming. Because everyone in the group has to be persuaded to make the same specific decision, this process involves much discussion and persuasion. If an organization used this method for all its decisions, it would slow down the decision making process immensely. It is not necessary to use a unanimous decision rule to decide on the color of the new carpet in the office. However, deciding whether or not to form a joint venture or merger with another corporation would probably benefit from the use of this decision rule.

Unanimous decision rule works best when those in the group feel a unity of purpose, have equal power and are willing to conscientiously use the decision rule. Furthermore, unanimity works when the group is able to operate independently of external hierarchical structures such as departments and divisions and has adequate time to reach a unanimous decision (Jefferson, 1994).

When individuals meet as a group to make a decision, the individuals in the group often have different preferences as to what decision will be made. During the course of discussion, these preferences may change. With a majority decision rule, a change in preference is not necessary by the minority, because a majority vote decides the course of action. With a unanimous decision rule, individuals in the minority must either change their preferences or else conform to the majority.

Group consensus can be viewed "as a social psychological process influenced by factors such as communication patterns, norms, polarization or conformity" (Lim, 1994, p. 439). There are several ways that groups can reach a unanimous decision. One of these is by random process, in which members gradually change their opinions over time until the group holds a unanimous opinion. Another way of reaching a unanimous decision is by mutual attraction. Mutual attraction involves processes in which a group member defends or advocates a specific position during group discussion. This increases the chance that others will shift their preferences to his or her position. Those who forcefully advocate their position attract others to their positions and help create group consensus (Coleman as cited in Godwin and Restle, 1974).

There are several other issues that are important to the process by which unanimity is achieved. These include issues about (a) minority and majority influence, (b) conformity and (c) psychological obstacles to dispute resolution.

Majority And Minority Influence

While research has been done on how the majority influences the minority in a group, there has also been some research on how the minority and influences the majority. Both these processes would take place in a group governed by unanimous decision rule since either the majority must change to the minority position, the minority must shift to the majority position, or some alternative must be agreed upon. One interesting issue in
minority/majority influence is favorable attitudes to positions presented by the minority to the majority. Baker and Petty (1994) found that the use of strong arguments by majorities resulted in more favorable attitudes toward their proposal than the use of weak arguments. The quality of arguments made by minorities did not affect attitudes. It appears that more credibility is given to the majority presentations than minority presentations.

However, research by Latane and Wolf (1981) points out that just because a group is a minority does not mean that it has less power than the majority. While majorities have the advantage of size, position and power, a minority can place the majority at a disadvantage if the minority is very confident about and committed to its position. Similarly, Moscovici describes a model in which the minority, in order to influence the majority:

Must initially induce a conflict with the majority by challenging the majority norm; consequently it has to provide a consistent and stable alternative norm. Both goals are achieved by showing a behavioral style that indicates certainty and commitment (as cited in Maass and Clark, 1984 p.428).

While minority influence appears to be the result of commitment and persuasion, majority influence is often the result of a comparison process. In this process those in the minority compare their preferences to the majority’s preference. Because of the need for unanimity, those in the minority may publicly change their preference in a process known as compliance, while privately holding their own original view. Thus, unanimity may be “derived from a need for consensus and not from a change in understanding of the issue under discussion” (Wood et al., 1994 p.324).

Other processes may also be involved in reconciling majority and minority preferences. For example, the majority and minority may reach a compromise or may use methods like logrolling. Logrolling occurs in situations in which the majority and minority preferences are highly discrepant and the majority moves towards the minority position under the expectation that the minority will move toward the majority position (Kerr, 1992).

**Conformity**

Many times unanimous decisions are made by persuading group members to choose an option by education, debate and presentation of information. It is likely that there will be times that the minority members will merely conform to the preferences of the majority in order to reach a unanimous decision. Conformity is different from compliance because it is based on social pressures from the group rather than a need for consensus. Although the minority member has the power of veto, they may choose not to exercise this power because of implicit or explicit pressure from the majority, even if the minority member is convinced that the majority is moving in the wrong direction.

In his classic research on conformity, Asch (1956) found that conformity to the majority occurred...
quite often, even when the majority was obviously wrong. In this study, subjects were presented with one display consisting of one line and then were presented with another display consisting of three lines. They were then asked which of the three lines matched the first line. Subjects were placed in a group of experimental confederates who all picked the same wrong line. A significant number of the subjects conformed to the minority position and also chose the obviously wrong alternative. If conformity happens this commonly on an easily verifiable task such as matching physical objects, it seems likely that the pressure to conform to the majority would be even stronger in situations involving much less easily verifiable tasks such as juries or strategic decisions.

Psychological Obstacles

When members of groups have different preferences on the alternative to be chosen, they have psychological barriers that must be overcome if they are to change their preference in the process of reaching a unanimous decision. These psychological barriers are the result of the cognitive and motivational processes that govern "the way that human beings interpret information, evaluate risks, set priorities and experience feelings of gain or loss" (Ross and Ward, 1995 p.263).

One such psychological obstacle is the perceptions individual members have of support for their positions as being higher than it actually is(Marks and Miller, 1987). Research by Miller (1993) found that minorities tend to overestimate support for their position while majorities underestimate support. Research by Mullen and Smith (1989) found that a minority's estimated support for their decision to be at higher levels as the actual support decreased. Majorities tended to increasingly underestimate the support for their position as the actual level of support increased. Miller (1993) argues that this "tendency to perceive consensus could make it difficult to achieve real consensus" (p.390).

One possible effect of the false consensus bias is that it could give minorities more power by motivating them "to press their points, provide fuel for their arguments about why they should prevail, and in general place them in a stronger position than would otherwise be the case" (Miller, 1993 p.390). The false consensus effect may particularly come into play in groups ruled by an unanimous decision rule in which the issue is debated until the group can come to a unanimous decision. False perceptions of support may motivate minorities to hold on to their viewpoint longer. The longer those in the minority hold their position, the more the chances they have to change other members' opinions.

Group Interaction

Much of the research on unanimity has focused on the effects of using this decision rule on the interaction and performance of the group. Research has focused on several different areas including (a) preferences shift and satisfaction, (b) ability to reach unanimous decisions, (c) problem solving and learning, (d) selection of group members and (e)
comparative performance with other decision rules.

Kaplan and Miller (1987) performed a study on normative versus informational influence in relation to type of issue and assigned decision rule. The purpose of this research was to examine shifts in preferences following discussion and the process involved in these shifts. Their subjects were 240 female undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Subjects were assigned to groups of six whose task was to come to an agreement on a damage award for a civil case. Half of the groups were assigned an unanimous decision rule and half of them were assigned a majority decision rule. Groups were given either intellective issues, which are issues that have verifiably correct answers or judgmental issues, “which involve behavioral, ethical or esthetic judgments for which there are no demonstrably correct answers” (Kaplan and Miller, 1987 p.307).

This study found two effects that are relevant to this literature review. Kaplan and Miller (1987) found that the largest shift in preference occurred in groups using the unanimity rule on judgmental issues. These are issues, such as ethic judgments on which there is no correct answer that can be easily verified. Subjects were least satisfied with decisions made on judgmental issues under majority rule. In other words, the use of unanimous decision rule increased satisfaction with decisions made on issues with no verifiably correct answers.

Kerr (1992) studied the effects of issue importance on the ability to reach unanimous decisions. He placed 236 undergraduate students in 15 person decision groups. Groups were given a set amount of time to discuss the problems of varying importance and then instructed to come to an agreement. If an agreement could not be reached, the decision was recorded as NO GROUP DECISION. Kerr (1992) found that it was more difficult for groups to reach unanimous decisions on important issues than on unimportant issues. While unanimous decision rule is best used for important decisions, these are the hardest decisions to reach a unanimous agreement on.

Effects Of Unanimous Decision

Stasson, et al. (1991) placed introductory psychology students into either an individual mathematical problem solving situation or into five-person groups assigned to work on sets of mathematical problems. The general hypothesis in this experiment was that assigned decision rules would affect group problem-solving performance and group-to-individual problem-solving transfer. The experimenters manipulated the assigned decision rule by giving groups either a no consensus, majority or unanimity decision rule. The researchers measured learning in (a) and individual pretest, (b) a group test and (c) an individual posttest.

The dependent variable in this experiment was mean performance measured by the number of correct responses on the mathematical problems. The experimenters found that majority-rule groups experienced higher levels of group-to-individual
and individual pretest, (b) a group test and (c) an individual posttest.

The dependent variable in this experiment was mean performance measured by the number of correct responses on the mathematical problems. The experimenters found that majority-rule groups experienced higher levels of group-to-individual transfer. In situations where "no member was correct at the outset of discussion, truth emerged more often in the unanimity condition than in the majority condition" (Stasson et al., 1991 p.33). The experimenters suggested that groups should use unanimous decision rules in situations in which group-level performance is important should use majority decision rules when group-to-individual transfer is also important.

One interesting issue related to groups is the selection of new members. Platt (1992) hypothesized that groups using unanimous decision rule to select members would create a more homogenous group than groups using majority decision rule. Platt placed M.B.A. students in groups of three and assigned them different decision rules for selecting new students to be admitted to the school. Unanimous decision rule resulted in a more homogeneous group of admitted students than did majority rule. Platt (1992) suggested that these might be generalizable to other situations, such as a corporate board of directors. A board of directors using unanimity might better reach organizational goals by maintaining narrow and consistent policies but may also discourage innovation.

This tendency of groups to select new members that have similar characteristics to those already in the group, raises some interesting issues. Groups tend to make better decisions when they are heterogeneous, composed of members from a wide variety of specialization, possess complimentary skills and that bring a wide variety of opinions to the group (Greenberg and Baron, 1995). The selection of new members by individuals in the group may actually lead to poorer performance. It can be speculated that it would be advantageous to have someone outside the group determine group composition in order to ensure that the group was heterogeneous. The type of decision rule used should be carefully chosen when groups are selecting new members.

Research by Miller and Anderson (1979) examined the effects of group decision rules on the rejection of deviates. This study examined the effects of majority rule, dictatorship rule and unanimity rule on the rejection of deviates. The subjects were 256 women enrolled in an introductory psychology course. These subjects were divided into five-person groups that included four naïve subjects and one experimental confederate. Groups were assigned one of the three decision rules, were given the case study of a youthful offender and were asked to determine whether this offender should be confined to a state institution. The results showed that the assigned decision rule did not matter when the deviate was not able to impose their will on the group. However when the deviate was able to force their preference on the group, the deviate was strongly rejected by the group and
the decision was seen as unfair and unrepresentative.

When an individual in the minority exercises their veto right on the group and causes a non representative decision to be made, the individual may be strongly rejected by the group. This may pose problems in a situation in which the group will have to work together on future problems. Exercising the right to veto a decision may lead to damaged relationships that may affect future group decision processes.

Miller (1985) used 240 male college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course as subjects for a study on group decision making under majority and unanimity rules. He hypothesized that assigned decision rule information on preferences would affect the decisions made. Subjects were divided into three-person groups and the groups were given either a majority or unanimity decision rule. The groups had to choose between a set of alternatives laid out on a continuum. Rewards were given in such a way that each group member preferred a different alternative. In each study, one subject was assigned (a) a left position, (b) one "center" position and (c) one right position on the continuum.

The center position was actually slightly to the left of the center. The subjects were awarded larger payoffs when the group selected their preferred alternative or an alternative near their preferred one. Miller (1985) found that under unanimous decision rule, alternatives closer to the most extreme member, the right position, were chosen more than under majority rule. The results also indicated that the use of the different decision rules led to different decisions when members knew each others preference, but this did not affect the decision when they were not given this information.

The information that group members have about the preferences of other members may affect what decision is chosen. Miller (1985) concluded that this research was important because it indicated that in situations in which groups must choose among alternatives on a continuum. The type of decision rule may result in different decisions. Miller (1985) suggested that the differing results between decision rules were the result of "splitting the difference" between the two positions closest to each other in the majority rule and the two extreme positions in the unanimity rule. After all, in the unanimity rule groups, the individual whose position is farthest from the other two will be able to veto a splitting of the difference between these two closer members. However, in the majority rule groups, the extreme member does not have this option.

In a study by Schweiger, Sandberg and Ragan (1986) 120 M.B.A. students from a course in corporate strategy and policy were involved in comparison of (a) dialectical inquiry, (b) devil's advocacy and (c) consensus decision rules. Dialectical inquiry and devil's advocacy are rules based on conflict rather than on agreement. In the devil's advocacy decision aid, one member in the group sets forward a plan and then another member of the group is designated as the devil's advocate who criticizes the plan in
Unanimity

attempt to point out any faults and
reasons why the plan should not be
implemented.

The dialectical inquiry decision
rule involves proposing a plan and
identifying the facts that support the
plan. Next, the underlying
assumptions are identified and a
counterplan is developed. This
counterplan is based on assumptions
that are opposite to those that underlie
the original plan. Finally, a structured,
forceful presentation and debate of the
two plans takes place (Schwenk and
Valacich, 1994).

Subjects were assigned to four-
person groups and the groups were
assigned either a dialectical inquiry,
devil's advocacy or consensus
condition. The groups were asked to
analyze a case study of a drug
company and to make
recommendations based on the case
hypothesized that the assigned decision
rule would affect (a) group
performance, (b) group member's
satisfaction, (c) critical evaluation, (d)
acceptance of the decision and (e)
confidence in decision. The results
indicated that the consensus decision
rule was inferior to the conflict-based
decision aids on the quality of
assumptions and recommendations
made by the groups. However, groups
using the consensus decision rule
expressed greater acceptance of
decisions, satisfaction with groups and
the desire to work together in the
future than groups using the other
decision rules. This suggests that
conflict-based decision making may
result in better decision-making, but at
a cost to group harmony.

In a study similar to the earlier
research by Miller and Anderson
(1979), Miller et al., (1987) examined
some of the social psychological
effects of different group decision
rules. They used 296 male students
from an introductory psychology class
for this study. Subjects were divided
into five-person groups with one
member deviating from the majority
opinion. Groups were assigned either
a majority, dictatorial or unanimity
decision rule.

The group task was to read a
case study and decision whether a
youthful offender should be confined
to a state institution. The researchers
hypothesized that the assigned decision
rule would affect satisfaction with
decisions, perceived fairness of rules
and rejection between the majority and
deviates. The results indicated that
agreement with the decision and
feelings that the decision was
representative of the group affected
satisfaction and perceived fairness of
decision rule. The actual decision
reached can affect the way individuals
think the decision was
unrepresentative of the group or if they
disagree with the decision.

This finding is probably
because the deviate in the latter two
decision rules is able to impose their
preference on the group. The results
also indicated that there was a higher
degree of rejection of deviates if the
deviates were able to impose an
unrepresentative decision on the group.

Schweiger et al. (1989) used
120 middle and upper middle level
managers from a Fortune 500 company
in a study of the effects of assigned
decision rule on group performance,
group members' reactions, meeting
time and experience. Subjects were assigned to four-person groups and were presented case studies that posed several strategic problems in two different sessions. Groups were assigned either (a) dialectical inquiry, (b) devil’s advocacy or (c) consensus as a decision rule. They were required to analyze the case study and present recommendations, supporting facts and assumptions chosen by their group’s decision rule.

Schweiger et al. (1989) found that experience improved performance significantly, even though the case presented in the second section was more complex and difficult than the first one. They also found that the use of conflict-based decision aids, dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy, resulted in higher performance than groups using the unanimous decision rule. Members in the groups that used conflict-based decision rules reported that they reevaluated their recommendations and assumptions to a greater extent than did those in groups using the agreement-based decision rule. The conflict-based decision aids resulted in longer meeting time than consensus decision rule, although this effect was only significant in the first session.

Unlike earlier research, this study found that there was no significant differences in satisfaction among the three decisions aids, and satisfaction increased significantly between the first and second sessions. Decisions made by the consensus groups resulted in a higher degree of acceptance than decisions made by the conflict-based groups. This difference was only significant in the first session, which suggests that experience with a decision rule increases acceptance of decisions made by that rule. One of the major strengths of this study compared to many of the other studies done on unanimous decision rule was that it was conducted on a sample of managers rather than students.

Schwenk and Cosier (1993) hypothesized that groups assigned a conflict-based decision making technique would make higher quality decisions and have a higher degree of critical evaluation. They also hypothesized that these groups would have less commitment to the group’s decisions and would have less interest on working together in the future than groups given a consensus-based decision aid or groups given no decision aid.

The subjects were 152 students who were placed in groups and assigned to either (a) a devil’s advocate decision aid, a conflict-based decision technique, (b) an agreement decision aid, which avoided techniques like majority voting or (c) no decision aid, in which groups were not given instructions on how to conduct their analysis. The agreement based decision aid was comparable to unanimous decision rule. Schwenk and Cosier (1993) found that their hypotheses were partially supported. The results indicated that the groups given the conflict-based decision aid had a greater degree of critical evaluation but did not produce decisions of a significantly higher quality than groups given the agreement-based rule or no decision rule. The results were also mixed on the issues of commitment and willingness to work together. Those
given an agreement-based decision rule expressed a greater willingness to work together than those given a conflict-based decision aid. However, the conflict-based decision aid did not decrease expressions of commitment to the decision as was hypothesized.

**Negative Aspects**

Although the use of unanimity may result in several positive effects, there are also some definite problems involved in the use of this decision rule. There are two particular traps that groups governed by unanimous decision rule need to consider. These are group-think and entrapment.

One of the most dangerous problems that can surface during group decision making is groupthink. Groupthink can be defined as “a mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive in-group that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action” (Janis, 1971 p. 43). Group members “become more concerned about maintaining positive group spirit than about making the most realistic decisions” (Greenberg and Baron, 1995 p.396).

The concept of groupthink was developed by Janis through his analysis of decision making fiascoes such as the Bay of Pigs and the escalation in Vietnam.

There are several symptoms that indicate the presence of groupthink. These include (a) an illusion of invulnerability by those in the group, (b) collective rationalization, (c) unquestioned feelings of moral superiority and (d) excessive negative stereotyping of those outside the group. Symptoms also include (a) strong internal pressure to conform, (b) self-censorship of dissenting ideas, (c) an illusion of unanimity and (d) self appointed mind guard who protect the group from negative or threatening information (Greenberg and Baron, 1995).

When groupthink occurs in group decision making, several processes may inhibit decision making quality. According to Janis (1971) group processes resulting from groupthink include only discussing a small number of alternative and failing to reexamine the majority preference after learning of risks or drawbacks. Groups avoid discussion of ways to make rejected alternative more appealing and may make no effort to consult experts on the subject of the decision. Other processes resulting from groupthink include ignoring facts and opinions that do not support the preferred alternative and spending little time discussing the pitfalls that may hinder the implementation of the decision. Janis (1971) argued that these group processes result in poor decision making and were often involved in decision making fiascoes.

Although groups governed by all kinds of decision rules may fall victim to groupthink, it seems likely that groups governed by unanimous decision rule would be particularly at risk. Since the use of unanimous decision rule tends to foster group cohesiveness, these groups are particularly vulnerable to groupthink. According to Janis (1971), group cohesiveness is one of the characteristics that may lead to groupthink. The unanimity requires that conflict be eventually put aside so
a common decision may be reached. This process may involve strong internal pressures to conform, which is also a symptom of groupthink. If group members are pressured into a course of action they are not necessarily comfortable with, an illusion of unanimity may occur which is a further symptom of groupthink. Since the model proposed by Janis (1971) argues that groups that fall victim to groupthink tend to make poor quality decisions, groups governed by unanimity should be especially sensitive to signs of groupthink. Several methods have been proposed to combat groupthink in decision making groups. These include promoting open inquiry within the group, using subgroups, admitting shortcomings, and holding second-chance meetings (Greenberg and Baron, 1995).

This concept of groupthink is intuitively appealing and seems to provide a good explanation for decision making fiascoes. Aldag and Fuller (1993) question the validity of this model of decision making fiascoes for several reasons. They argue that this model has questionable validity for several reasons. It has been widely generalized even though it was based on a small restricted sample and has not received consistent empirical support (Aldag and Fuller, 1993). One of the main criticisms of the groupthink model is that most of its support “has come from retrospective case studies that have focused on decision fiascoes rather than comparing the decision-making processes associated with good and bad decisions” (Aldag and Fuller, 1993, 538). Janis' theory is widely accepted even though he focused only on decision failures and he did not include research on successful decision making that may have occurred under the same symptoms and conditions.

Similar to the idea of groupthink is the concept of entrapment studied by Kameda and Sugimori (1993). While groupthink usually refers to defective decision making processes, entrapment involves increasing the commitment to a previous decision in order to justify the investments resulting from that decision.

In order to test the effects of decision rules on group entrapment, Kameda and Sugimori (1993) conducted an experiment in which undergraduate students made a series of related decisions under majority or unanimity decision rules. Subjects were randomly assigned to a group governed either by majority or unanimity decision rule. The students were given a situation in which they made an initial choice about a course of action from several alternatives. They were then given feedback about the outcomes of their decision and were required periodically to decide whether to proceed with the initial course of action, or to choose a different alternative from the initial choices. Entrapment was measured by the length of time that the groups kept the initial course of action in the face of negative outcomes.

Kameda and Sugimori (1993) found that groups governed by unanimous decision rule were entrapped more than groups governed by majority rule. One explanation for this was that in groups governed by majority rule, those whose preferred
initial alternative was not chosen would be more likely to advocate a decision to change to a different alternative when faced with negative outcomes. Those in the unanimous decision rule group had to be convinced of the correctness of the initial choice instead of being merely outvoted. As a result, they had more psychological stake in the decision than those governed by majority rule. They would be more committed to the original decision, and less open to believing they had made an incorrect choice.

Like groupthink, it appears that entrapment is a condition that groups governed by unanimous decision rules are particularly vulnerable to. Therefore, it is important for such groups to be aware of these potential traps and take steps to combat the problems associated with them.

Conclusions

Overall, the research presents a mixed view of the effectiveness of unanimous decision rule. Decisions made by unanimity take more time and effort to make, but group members become more committed to the decision, reach a greater understanding of the decision, and are more likely to support the decision (Gitman and McDaniel, 1995). While unanimous decision rule appears to result in greater satisfaction with decisions, greater acceptance of decisions, and greater interest of members to work with the group again, other decision aids appear to result in better decision quality and critical evaluation. It also appears that groups governed by unanimous decision rules would be particularly prone to groupthink and entrapment. The priorities of a decision making group need to be taken into account when a decision rule is selected. If the group is interested in decision quality over cohesiveness, unanimous decision rule should not be used. If the group is interested more in cohesiveness than decision quality, unanimity could be a valuable decision rule.

While much important research has been done on unanimity, the generalizability of almost all the experiments can be questioned. Much of the research used student subjects who were brought together for one session of decision making tasks. In contrast, most decision-making groups in the real world are together for a much longer time, the members know each other better, and the members are much more experienced in group decision making. Therefore, an important area for further research would be conducting longitudinal studies of real-world decision making groups. It would be interesting to follow the performance of groups and organizations using unanimity, majority, devil’s advocacy, and dialectical inquiry.

Valuable future research could also be done on groupthink and entrapment among real-world decision making groups. Research conducted in non-laboratory environments would be very important, but at the very least, it would be important that future research use management executives and others involved professionally in decision making in future laboratory experiences.

It would also be important to compare the results of research using executives as subjects with those using
students. If there is a high-correlation in the results, it could be argued that the student data is more readily generalizable than is possible to argue now.

It would also be interesting to see further cross-cultural research on the use of decision rules. It would be interesting to see if the effects of decision rules vary from culture to culture. This would be important information to multi-national corporations and multi-cultural organizations.

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