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## ARTICLE: WHAT IS GROUPTHINK?

Dissenting voices against lockdowns and vaccine mandates claim that people are "following the herd," being "sheeple," and "falling into line" by heeding the government's advice.

The concept of following the crowd is surely as old as time, however French psychologist and doctor Gustave Le Bon in his 1895 text "*The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*" made it a spectacle. He posited that behaviour develops through belonging to a kind of "group mind". According to Le Bon, the "group mind" is characterised by various main features such as loss of conscious personality, predominance of the unconscious being and a tendency towards immediate acceptance of the ideas instilled.

"Groupthink" has been a popular explanation for how groups of people can make flawed decisions due to their individuality being overturned by the dynamics of the group. The term was first introduced by the Yale psychologist Irving Janis, through his analysis of decision-making during the US invasion of Cuba in April 1961 – the so-called Bay of Pigs fiasco. The failure of the US invasion was due to the uncritical acceptance of a deeply flawed plan. This was rooted in a series of stereotypic assumptions about Fidel Castro and the Cubans as inept and weak. When critics pointed out the problems with these assumptions, their criticisms were simply ignored.

Another example of groupthink being used to explain political mistakes was during lead-up to the Brexit referendum, when there seemed to be broad 'expert' consensus about various economic catastrophes that would follow an exit from the European Union – catastrophes which, to date, have failed to materialise.

Donelson Forsyth, in an article published in *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, suggests people in groups often make mistakes, not because they have been overcome by their emotions or have subpar intelligence but because group-level processes prevent members from accurately appraising information, identifying errors, and considering superior alternatives. This analysis won the 2020 *Group Dynamics* Most Valuable Paper award.

Groupthink has been a popular explanation during the pandemic to describe cognitive biases and rigid rhetorical positioning, such as in the case of the lab leak theory. Bret Stephens in the *New York Times* wrote that the common reaction in elite liberal circles was to dismiss the theory altogether. It was called a fringe theory, a debunked claim, dangerous conspiracy theory "advanced by conservatives "known to regularly spew nonsense (and bash China)." Stephens mentioned that Senator Tom Cotton began pointing to a disturbing fact set February last year: the pandemic originating in the same city where a Chinese lab was conducting high-end experiments on bat viruses; the report that some of the original Covid patients had no contact with the food markets where the pandemic supposedly originated; the fact that the Chinese government stonewalled its way through the crisis. "Think what you will about the Arkansas Republican, but these were reasonable observations warranting impartial investigation," Stephens said. Further, science reporters immediately accepted the authority of a February 2020 letter, signed by 27 scientists and

published in The Lancet, insisting on the “natural origin” of Covid, “but those reporters hadn’t probed the ties between the letter’s lead author and the Wuhan lab (a fact, as the science writer Nicholas Wade points out in a landmark essay in The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, that has been public knowledge for months).” Facebook, which in February this year banned the lab-leak theory from its platform, was overturned as soon as Biden suggested an inquiry be opened into the origins of the virus. This is what Stephens calls “media groupthink” - when the media converges around a consensus that turns out either to be false, or to have been hastily made.

However there is a counterpunch to the concept of “groupthink” and its own credibility. Critics of groupthink have pointed to examples showing that the features of groupthink don’t always lead to negative outcomes, and that not all groups exhibit the features of groupthink. Sometimes people accept a judgment because it fits with a particular stereotype held (as in the Bay of Pigs); sometimes people value others’ judgments because they have more general norms of deference; sometimes because cohesion is the goal of the particular group.

In an article written in The Guardian, Stephen Reicher and John Drury, participants in the Sage subcommittee advising on behavioural science during the pandemic propose that blaming the myopia of political parties on groupthink lets politicians off the hook. Dominic Cummings mounted a systematic attack on the decisions of the government and its scientific advisory groups during the pandemic, repeatedly suggesting decisions were a result of “groupthink”. It was used to explain the delay in understanding the threat posed by the virus, in locking down, in closing borders, in building a testing system, in developing vaccines. Reicher and Drury say the use of “groupthink” to explain these failures would ignore the particular culture of various groups and how the stereotypes and ideologies embraced by these groups may have stopped them from taking the necessary interventions to control Covid-19. The pair say that by representing failures as the outcome of “groupthink” hides their political basis.

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## 2 MIN AUDIO SCRIPT

Why do people ascribe themselves to certain groups and unify around ideas when they couldn’t be more different in character, essence and career? And why do so many people follow this “belief” movement which is usually contrary to their common sense?

In Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 work “*The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*”, we find an analysis of crowd psychology. We learn that the basic properties of this crowd are:

Instinctuality, irritability, inability to think logically, lack of judgment and critical spirit, exuberance of unconscious feelings and the influence of the leaders.

Here are 6 points he makes in his text that make it clear why so many people behave differently when they are in a group, especially during major upheavals.

1. "In the crowd, every feeling, every action is transferable, and indeed to such a high degree that the individual very easily sacrifices his personal wishes to the overall wishes."

Individual instincts, feelings and passions are transferred to a collective membership in order to be part of a specific group. As a social being, humans want to be heard and accepted, and they will change thoughts and behavior in order to achieve this.

Le Bon goes on to explain: "It is precisely the communitarization of ordinary properties that explains to us why the masses can never perform actions that claim a particular intelligence" comm-uni-tari-zation

Certain actions and statements by groups seem to be contrary to all understanding and intelligence. We do not want familiar people, to turn away from us. However, if one does not find any support in their closest circle, it happens that one turns to more radical groups in order to get the appropriate recognition there — regardless of whether we are using intelligence and common sense. The greater the urge to want to belong to a certain group, the quicker one's own thoughts and behaviour are rejected and replaced by new ones.

2. "So the crowd must be ... excessively gullible. Nothing seems improbable to them."

Le Bon describes this as the "process of collective hallucinations". All that is needed is to describe extremely gripping images and create them in people's heads so that they immediately shudder, become outraged and join the movement immediately and with conviction. It doesn't matter whether these pictures are true or fabricated. If the images contain only a spark of heroism or injustice, people are attracted to them and, through their gained credulity, are deeply impacted.

Le Bon explains further: the newly created group "takes the images... for reality. [...] The imagined idea can then become the core of a kind of crystallization that seizes the area of the intellect and paralyzes all critical spirit."

3. "The one-sidedness and exuberance of the feelings of the crowds save them from doubt and uncertainty."

He describes the imaginary evidence of emotionally generated images as "collective logic". Because the pictorial nature of events, whether real or not, can be impressed particularly well in the memory, where individual cases are generalized particularly prematurely by the pull of the crowd. This harbors the risk, as the superficial links and associations lead to hasty logic.

The crowd lose their minds due to the conscious influence and rheroticism of the speakers and fall for the deceptive and persuaded half-truths of decisive experiences. It takes over the generated images for real events and propagates them with full conviction and without any doubt, no matter how illogical they are.

4. "The judgments that the crowd accept are only forced, never tested judgments."

Because of the gullibility of the crowd, claims are taken to be true without evidence or logic, and consequently new values are put on in the context of the community.

Le Bon also describes an epidemic virus outbreak in his work:

"The great influenza epidemic that killed five thousand people in Paris within a few weeks a few years ago made little impression on the people's imagination. Of course, this hecatomb was literally not transformed into some visible images, but only into the daily statistical reports. The crowd did not care for a moment about these gradual losses, which demanded considerable sacrifices in human life and commercial values."

Here lies the danger: that we constantly but surely underestimate the existence of the virus and that we long for a normal life, like before the pandemic, more and more. As a result, we begin to misjudge the global situation and increasingly have the urge to resume normal life. We loosen the restrictions, take off masks and only test ourselves sporadically. The vaccination as the saviour is always easier to accept.

5. "The single person realises that he could not cremate a palace or plunder a shop alone, and the temptation to do so hardly occurs to him. As a member of a crowd, however, he takes over the power consciousness that the crowd gives him."

In the crowd, the individual disappears and with it the sense of responsibility. They immediately experience the strength and power of the mass movement and are consequently blinded by the seeming impunity. In the crowd they find themselves safe, strong and recognised.

The radicalism of the crowd makes the deceptive distribution of falsehoods and supposed evidence as well as illogical claims a danger to society. The transmission of ideas that are accepted without verification creates unrest, causes conflicts and ultimately gives rise to terrorist traits.

6. "Most people, especially among the masses of the people, have no clear and correct idea of anything outside of their professional field. They are unable to guide themselves; so the leader serves them as a guide."

In his work, Le Bon describes the crowd as a homogeneous being that forms through the union of people of different origins and backgrounds.

He wittily states "The acquisition of useless knowledge is a sure way to turn a person into an outrage."

He criticizes the fact that the education system neither serves creativity, personal development and independence nor the ability to solve problems, but exclusively the pure memorization and unreflective acquisition of knowledge.

Le Bon concludes that the influence of a leader is imperative to keep the crowd firmly under control. Critical thinking is not desired.

The mass of people lapse into the rigidity of an automaton and moves through unreflected input and output. In such a state, of course, we think we can understand the claims and prove them, but in fact we can't.

As for a remedy for submitting to the crowd mind, Le Bon says: "Experience is pretty much the only effective means of planting truth in the mass soul and destroying deceptions that have become dangerous."