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Social identity, deindividuation and organizational behaviour: The upside to groupthink, information over-sampling and soldiering

The study of the deindividuation process and of the phenomena in which it is implicated came to prominence in social psychology with the pioneering work of Zimbardo and his colleagues in the late 1960s (e.g., Zimbardo, 1969). However, as Reicher, Spears and Postmes (1995) observe, the notion of deindividuation in fact has a much longer history. Indeed, its influence can be seen to parallel dominant views in Western thought that date back at least as far as the writings of Aristotle over two thousand years ago. Thus in his *Ethics* Aristotle closely identified virtue and rationality with forms of moderation borne of personal contemplation and morality, and while he acknowledged the utility of group-based civic action he was wary of the excesses to which group activity lent itself and of the implications of group membership for the individual. As he put it:

> It is the mark of a good man to direct his energies to what is good... and he does it on account of the intellectual part of him, which is held to be the self of the individual. Such a person likes his own company, because he enjoys being by himself.... It would seem that the thinking part is, or most nearly is, the individual self. (350bc/1986, p. 294)

The view that any departure from this individual self can have dire consequences both for the person and for society has been widely promulgated by social psychologists. And because this message fits comfortably with a widespread ideology of individualism which sees a person's true self as residing in his or her individuality, it has not struggled to find favour with researchers in other disciplines. This is particularly true in areas of organizational and management science, where, if anything, individualism has an even stronger foothold than it does in social psychology (see Pfeffer, 1997, 1998). Many factors have contributed to this state of affairs, but one reason why critiques of individualism (e.g., Mayo, 1949; McGregor, 1960) have had less impact on organizational theorists than they have on researchers in other areas is that they have offered little prospect for progress in the analysis of *psychological process*.

In an effort to go some way towards redressing this situation, this chapter seeks to review some of those organizational topics that have been most influenced by traditional deindividuation theory and to point to ways in which these areas are open to reinterpretation and reinvigoration from a social identity perspective. The three topics on which the paper focuses are (a) *groupthink* — the process of excessive concurrence seeking that is implicated in faulty group decision making and a lack of

critical thinking (Janis, 1972, 1982); (b) *information over-sampling* — the process that leads group members to share information with which they are all familiar rather than that which is known to only some members (Stasser, 1992; Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996); and (c) *soldiering* — the process that leads to individual performance on a task being diminished as a result of a collective strategy on the part of group members (Taylor, 1911).

Consideration of these topics is part of a general attempt to provide a comprehensive and integrated analysis of organizational behaviour from a social identity perspective (Haslam, in press a). However, a number of related points mark these topics out as particularly worthy of consideration in this forum. First amongst these is the fact that received theories of these processes all draw heavily on unreconstructed deindividuation principles. In all three cases, loss of personal identity is implicated in organizational error and dysfunction. Apparently, as the individual becomes submerged within the group, reason, responsibility and simple human decency all go out of the window. Secondly though, it is interesting to note that while orthodox treatments of these topics are united by a common metatheory, researchers in the past have been reluctant to identify theoretical links between them. Nevertheless, it would appear that strong links *do* exist. In particular, these can be found in the manner in which group involvement leads to *new* and *socially creative* forms of action that cannot be discovered in, or reduced to, their individual inputs. In this regard, the third and final reason for examining these topics is that they all seem amenable to the alternative analysis of deindividuation phenomena articulated by social identity and self-categorizations theorists (e.g., Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher, 1987; Reicher et al., 1995; Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). This provides a new theoretical perspective on these various processes, but it also allows for radical reinterpretation of the *products* to which they lead. So while groupthink, information over-sampling and soldiering and are routinely criticized as leading to inferior — even disastrous — organizational outcomes, a social identity analysis suggests that they may actually be *essential* for adaptive and sustainable organizational functioning. Clearly this is a large case to prosecute compellingly in such a short chapter, but we can start by briefly summarizing the conventional wisdom that surrounds the three topics.

An overview of research in groupthink, information over-sampling and soldiering

Detailed discussions of the topics on which this paper focuses are available elsewhere, and this is not the place to review them in depth. Indeed, in many respects these issues represent the backbone of that branch of organizational theory that is informed by social psychological research into group processes, and for that reason it would only be a deficient textbook that neglected to discuss them. This is particularly true in the case of groupthink. As Turner and Pratkanis (1998a) note in a recent special issue of *Organizational Behaviour and Group Decision Processes* that marked the 25th anniversary of Janis' (1972) original book, this work has become the standard model of small-group decision making and no anthology of

classic organizational articles is complete if it lacks Janis' (1971) original presentation of his theory in *Psychology Today*.

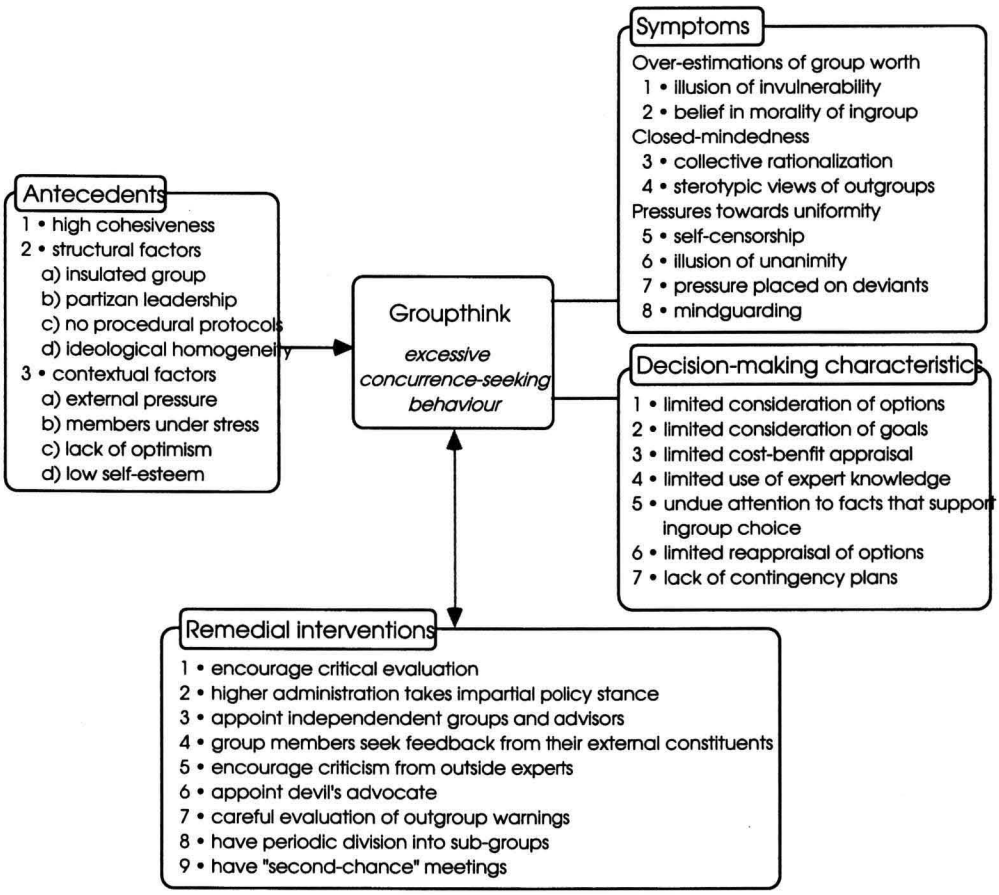

Figure 1: Features of groupthink (following Janis, 1971; Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 132; from Haslam, in press).

As Figure 1 illustrates, the core symptoms of groupthink fall into three classes: (a) over-estimations of the power and morality of an ingroup, (b) closed-mindedness and (c) pressures towards uniformity. According to Janis, a group that has fallen prey to the syndrome thus tends to believe it is better, more powerful and more invulnerable than it really is and has unquestioning faith in its own moral authority. It is also very effective at explaining away warnings from outsiders and tends to underestimate the competence and strength of the relevant outgroups with which it is competing. Within-group consensus is also highly prized, so that individual group members who have doubts fail to voice them (i.e., they engage in self-censorship) and the group as a whole puts pressure on members who deviate

from the group position. On top of all this, group members collectively overestimate the degree to which group consensus actually exists and 'mindguards' emerge from within the group to shield it from information that might destroy its illusions.

If we ask what it is that leads to groupthink and what factors might remediate it, the answers provided by Janis (1982) fit well with the basic tenets of classic deindividuation theory. At the heart of the problem is the readiness of individuals to yield to the will of the group and, in particular, to its demands for consensus at all costs. In this context individuals suspend the critical faculties and morals that would protect them from acts of imprudence or moral turpitude and become intoxicated by the persuasive unanimity of their peers. Where their minds would formerly have told them to 'just say no' their hearts now say 'yes, yes, yes'.

Unsurprisingly, the rehabilitation or prophylactic process for (potential) groupthink victims involves protecting the group from itself. Recommendations include bringing in external advisors, creating intragroup division and actively countering group norms. It is interesting to note in passing that very similar strategies were suggested by Zimbardo (1969) as ways of protecting prisoners from the excesses of prison guards, and that similar policy recommendations have emerged from more recent reviews of inappropriate behaviour amongst real-life professional groups: harassment of female service personnel in the US Navy, treatment of suspected terrorists by the British judiciary, endemic corruption in the Australian Federal police force. The message is fairly straightforward: to remove the problem from society, remove the group from the individual.

A very similar message emerges from studies of information over-sampling and groupthink. Here, an abundance of research by Stasser and his colleagues (e.g., Stasser, 1992; Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996) points to the fact that when individu-

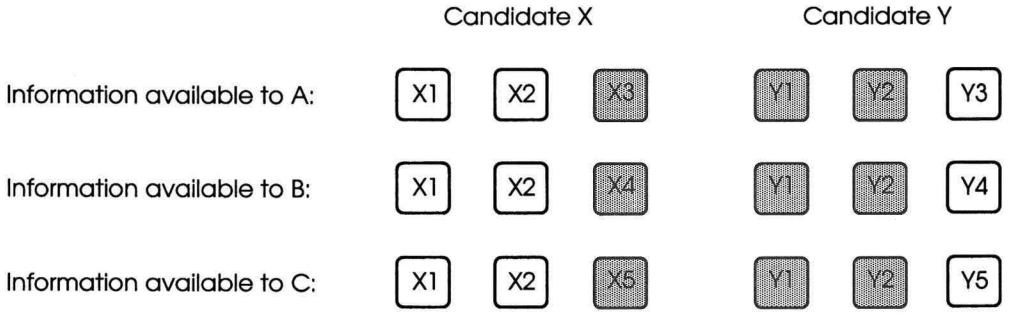

Figure 2: An example of a hidden profile (from Haslam, in press)

Note: The figure represents information about two job candidates X and Y that is available to members of a three-person selection panel, A, B and C. Shaded boxes denote negative information, unshaded denote positive information. Each number refers to a unique piece of information.
In this example, if panel members focus on information that they all have access to (i.e., X1, X2, Y1, Y2) they will favour Candidate X over Candidate Y, although in fact there is more positive information about Candidate Y (3 positive pieces of information: X3, X4, X5 and 2 negative X1, X2) than Candidate X (3 negative pieces of information: Y3, Y4, Y5 and 2 positive Y1, Y2).

als discuss information in groups, they have a strong inclination to share and attend to information that group members *all* have access to rather than that which is available only to *particular* members. The problematic aspects of this tendency are revealed in studies where the existence of so-called *hidden profiles* means that truth is to be discovered in *non*shared rather than shared information. As Figure 2 shows, in an organizational context this might mean that a selection panel ends up preferring a candidate with predominantly bad attributes (Candidate X) over one with predominantly good attributes (Candidate Y) if it happens to be the case that the panel members are all aware of the first candidate's few positive attributes (i.e., X1, X2) and the second candidate's few negative attributes (Y1, Y2). Again, then, as in the case of groupthink research, it appears to be the case that pressures to achieve consensus lead to suboptimal information use and to suboptimal organizational outcomes. And again, commonly prescribed remedies are seen to lie in strategies for countering the power of the group and bringing individuals back to their individuated senses — although researchers generally consider the prospects of this occurring to be rather bleak, such is the force of the cognitive bias to which group members routinely succumb.

Malign as groupthink and information over-sampling may appear to be, they are, however, somewhat overshadowed by the prospect of organizational *soldiering*. This term was coined by Taylor (1911) after his study of pig-iron handlers at the Midvale Steel works. In his initial observations of labourers Taylor (1911, p. 72) noted a marked 'loss of ambition and initiative' that he considered to be an inevitable consequence of the fact that they worked in groups:

> Careful analysis... demonstrated the fact that when workmen are herded together in gangs, each man in the gang becomes far less efficient than when his personal ambition is stimulated; that when men work in gangs their efficiency falls almost invariably down to or below the level of the worst man in the gang; and that they are all pulled down instead of being elevated by being herded together.

As a forerunner to much later research into the phenomenon of *social loafing* (e.g., Latané, Williams & Harkins, 1979), Taylor believed that this sluggishness derived from the anonymity and lack of accountability that the group afforded. In groups individuals are relieved of any honest inclination to work hard that they might possess and their character is thoroughly perverted:

> Unfortunately for the character of the workman, soldiering involves a deliberate attempt to deceive and mislead his employer, and thus upright and straightforward workmen are compelled to become more or less hypocritical. (Taylor, 1911, p. 23)

As Latané and his coworkers were to put it some 70 years later, loafing in groups is 'a kind of social disease' resulting from the diminished responsibility of deindividuated workers (1979, p. 831). Accordingly, like many latterday theorists, Taylor's remedy for the maladies he identified was simply to remove the individual from the group and the group from the organization. 'It is', Taylor (1911, p. 43) argued, 'an inflexible rule to talk to and deal with only one man at a time... since we are trying to develop each man to his highest state of efficiency and prosperity'.

Reconceptualizing group-based organizational behaviour: The upSIDE to groupthink, information over-sampling and soldiering

Although the impact of the above three research movements has been not been uniform, it is fair to say that all have exerted a profound impact on organizational theory and practice. It is interesting to note too, that although the foregoing review points to the underlying similarities in their metatheoretical underpinnings, most commentators would see each research program as quite distinct — not least because each emerged in a different era. Taylor's writing epitomizes early work in the school of scientific management and has a LeBonian coarseness about it that seems out of place today. He refers to particular workers in derogatory ways — for example, to one of his favoured workers, Schmidt, as 'a man of the mentally sluggish type' (1911, p. 46). Janis' ideas, on the other hand, have a very 70s feel. As with any good Len Deighton novel, there is talk of politics, brainwashing and subversion, and the group is a source of intrigue and fear. Finally, with Stasser's work we have squeaky-clean and highly respectable social cognition. Here thumb-nail sketches of lazy workers have been replaced by mathematical models of probabilistic information sampling. And now it is not individual workers that are branded as mentally sluggish but information-processors in general (cf. Gilbert & Hixon, 1991, p. 509).

Examination of these three topics thus serves to chart the developmental phases of anti-group prejudice in psychological theory. But as we can see, this is very much a development of *form* rather than *content*. Gone are the outspoken vulgarities of old-fashioned individualism, ushered in are the niceties of a more modern metatheory — but an individualistic one nonetheless. So, for all their apparent differences, each of these approaches leads to the same practical recommendations: suspect and stigmatize the group and, wherever possible, individualize the workforce.

In their seminal discussion of the SIDE model, Reicher et al. (1995, p. 161) point out that one of principal problems with prescriptions of this form is that they actively limit the capacity of group members 'to give full voice to their collective identities'. Essentially the same argument can be applied to research in the organizational area. However, in this domain it is possible to argue that the metatheory's function is much more *manifest* than *latent*. Organizational researchers are thus much more open in putting forward the view that group activity needs to be suppressed (or at least tightly controlled in the form of *team-Taylorism*; Baldry, Bain & Taylor, 1998) in the interests of organizational success. They are not slow to recognize that allowing workers 'to give full voice to their collective identities' could result in feelings of shared discontent, collective protest and industrial action — in short, that it could involve empowering the powerless. And while a number of organizational theorists (after Mayo, 1947; McGregor, 1960) have given sermons on the gospel of empowerment (e.g., by advocating New Industrial Relations (NIR) policies which involve both profit- and power-sharing), most commentators acknowledge that this is a gospel that is preached much more than it is practised (see Thompson & Warhurst, 1998). As summarized by Kelly and Kelly (1991, p. 41):

> It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that institutional, i.e., management, support for NIR is both instrumental and superficial. Management are willing to implement and support NIR initiatives only so long as they yield profitable results and do not impinge on their own power and status.

In relation to these points, received interpretations of the results of research into groupthink, information over-sampling and soldiering would certainly give succour to those who point to the malign influence of the group on the individual. What, one may well ask, is commendable about a group of workers who conspire to underperform, about a selection committee that selects a poor candidate over a good one, or about a government that hatches a crazy plan to invade a neighbouring island? A long answer to this question is available elsewhere (Haslam, in press a). However, along lines suggested by Pfeffer (1997), the key to a short answer lies in rediscovery of the *political analysis* that lies at the heart of received wisdom in these three areas. To help this rediscovery process, we can attempt to analyse situations in which the merits of soldiering, information over-sampling and groupthink may be more apparent and point to some empirical findings which lend support to our analysis.

In the first instance we might reflect on the activities of prisoners-of-war working on the notorious Burma-Thailand railway in World War II, and ask ourselves 'What was the appropriate way for these prisoners to display productivity?' Was it to work as hard as possible in order to complete the railway in the shortest possible time? Or was it to conspire through acts of obstinacy, belligerence and sabotage to thwart the project's completion? The answer of course, is that it depends on whose goals one sees as valid. However, from our own political vantage point, most of us would suggest that the strategy of defiance was the most commendable — not least, because it made a significant contribution to the eventual result of the war. Significantly though, many commentators have observed that the capacity for prisoners to actively resist their captors' injunctions to work hard was a function of their having a highly developed sense of group belonging (e.g., Dunlop, 1986; McCormack & Nelson, 1993). In short, it appears that it was only because they had a collective purpose and *shared social identity* that prisoners were able to collectively resist oppression.

Some empirical support for this analysis comes from a study recently conducted by Wallace (1998). In this, young army cadets had to participate in two tasks, one pleasant and one unpleasant. The unpleasant task was deliberately meaningless and involved tying and untying bootlaces as many times as possible in a 16-minute period. From our point of view, the central prediction was that the cadets would be most likely to soldier on this task under conditions where their group membership was salient and they performed the task in groups. As Figure 3 indicates, this prediction was confirmed. Moreover, responses on other measures suggested that this outcome was not associated with a sense of anonymity or lack of identifiability in the group, but rather with the cadets' feeling that in this condition they received more *support* from fellow group members for their collaborative act of insubordination. Like prisoners on the Burma-Thailand railway, they conspired against the experimenters because group membership made the act *meaningful and possible*. Of course, had we (the experimenters) been army officers, it is likely that we would, like Taylor or the Japanese prison guards, have put a completely different spin on

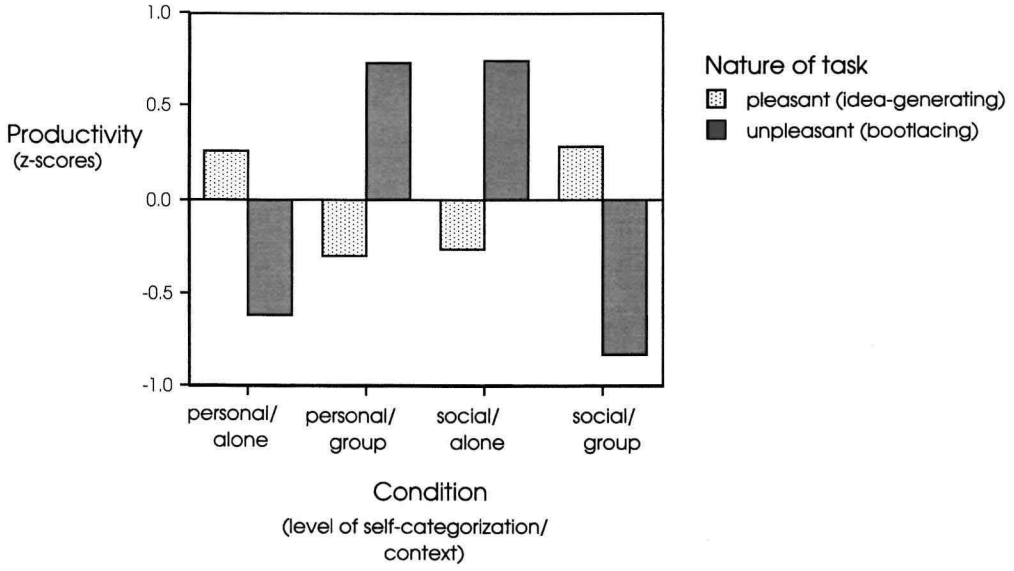

Figure 3: Productivity on pleasant and unpleasant tasks as a function of level of self-categorization and context (Wallace, 1998; from Haslam, in press)

Note: Performance on the two tasks is not directly comparable, so it is variation in productivity on the same task across conditions that is most informative.

these results. We might also have taken steps to disband or break up the group or to root out those perceived to be ringleaders and trouble-makers. This though, should be seen as a political act, not as one that is mitigated by psychological deficiency on the part of the cadets. Indeed, on the contrary, the effects observed in Wallace's study speak to the *psychological utility* of the group as a mechanism for social change.

A similar line of argument can be developed as an alternative to received analyses of information over-sampling and groupthink. In the case of the former process, some of the key questions that we can ask relate to the *assumptions* that guide research in this area. The two most important are possibly (a) whether attention to shared information serves critical social functions beyond simple information transfer and (b) whether information that all group members have access to is psychologically equivalent to information that is only available to particular individuals.

Following research by Worchel (e.g., 1994), it seems reasonable to suggest that our answers here may lead us down a different path to that taken by Stasser and his colleagues. Specifically, we might argue that, at least in the initial stages of group formation, the process of sharing familiar information is essential for a shared sense of the collective self to emerge amongst group members. Indeed, finding out and demonstrating publicly what 'we' have in common would appear to be essential to putting some content-related flesh onto the bone of psychological group membership. If all the contributions in this volume (and at the conference where they were initially

presented) were concerned only to articulate *different* points about deindividuation theory, could we hope to arrive at a common view about what makes the SIDE analysis different from that of Zimbardo and his colleagues? More significantly, could we hope to mount a collective challenge to the orthodoxy in this field?

In this context we might also suggest that, for present purposes, the beliefs that the various contributors to this volume share about deindividuation are of greater utility and significance than those they don't. For example, if all of the contributors had access to evidence suggesting that classical versions of the theory have a particular flaw, but two people had access to different pieces of information suggesting that it has merits, would it be appropriate to conclude that on the weight of available evidence the theory is valid? Surely the sensible course of action here would be to try to *resolve the inconsistency*, not simply to aggregate these pieces of information as if they were of equivalent objective value. Indeed, it is for precisely this reason that scientists hold conferences and meetings like the one that led to this volume, in an endeavour to take collaborative steps forward. That too, is why we have juries and selection panels and don't simply ask computers to determine whether someone should go to gaol or be given a particular job.

In such processes, it would also appear that the fact that some beliefs are widely shared while others are not *is itself* an important piece of *social* information that we need to take into account. Amongst other things, this is because information that is widely shared within an ingroup is generally much more likely to *inspire confidence* than that which is not (McGarty, Turner, Oakes & Haslam, 1993). Indeed, we might well ask how social movements (e.g., in science, politics and industry) would ever get off the ground if groups were forever attentive to faint voices of doubt and dissent within their ranks.

This question serves as a good entrée into some recent empirical research in which this alternative analysis of consensus-seeking behaviour was extended to address the full-blown phenomenon of groupthink (Haslam, Ryan, Postmes & Spears, 1999). As with the prisoner-of-war example above, the objective of the study was to challenge received interpretations of this process by examining the phenomenon under conditions where it led to what might be construed as *positive* outcomes. The study also sought to clarify the role that social identity and deindividuation processes played in fostering a group's initial commitment to a collaborative project and then maintaining that commitment through thick and thin.

The study asked groups of four students — who were defined as a decision-making executive — to make funding decisions in relation to a proposed child-care centre that was being built in a town centre. The study had three phases. At each phase groups were presented with information about the progress of the childcare centre in the form of press releases, letters from interested parties and official documentation (following Dietz-Uhler, 1996). At Phase 1 all looked rosy for the planners, in Phase 2 there were a few clouds on the horizon, but by Phase 3 things had started to look distinctly pear-shaped. The centre was behind schedule, had gone over budget, and toxic material had been discovered in the sandpit. None of these problems were fatal for the project's viability, but they made it clear that the scheme was not going to be all smooth sailing and would not be for the faint-hearted. Accordingly, the key

dependent variables were (a) how positively individuals felt about both the project and their group, and (b) how much money they were willing to commit for future building work from a fixed sum that varied between $250,000 and $350,000.

Manipulation of the study's independent variable involved assigning the students (N = 188) to one of three conditions intended to make either their personal, individuated identity salient or a shared, deindividuated social identity. In the *individuated* condition individuals were asked at every phase of the study to indicate what made them different from other group members and to wear individuating name badges ('JOHN', 'JANE', etc.). In a *deindividuated* condition group members were asked at each phase to identify attitudes to funding of community projects that their group had in common. At Phase 1 these attitudes were also translated into a group name that all members wore on a prominently-displayed badge throughout the study (e.g., 'BETTER FACILITIES', 'NO CUTS'). The same procedure was incorporated into a *deindividuated + threat* condition, but this also informed groups at Phase 1 that their decisions would be critically evaluated by *other* groups at the end of the study (a manipulation suggested by the work of Turner & Pratkanis, 1998b).

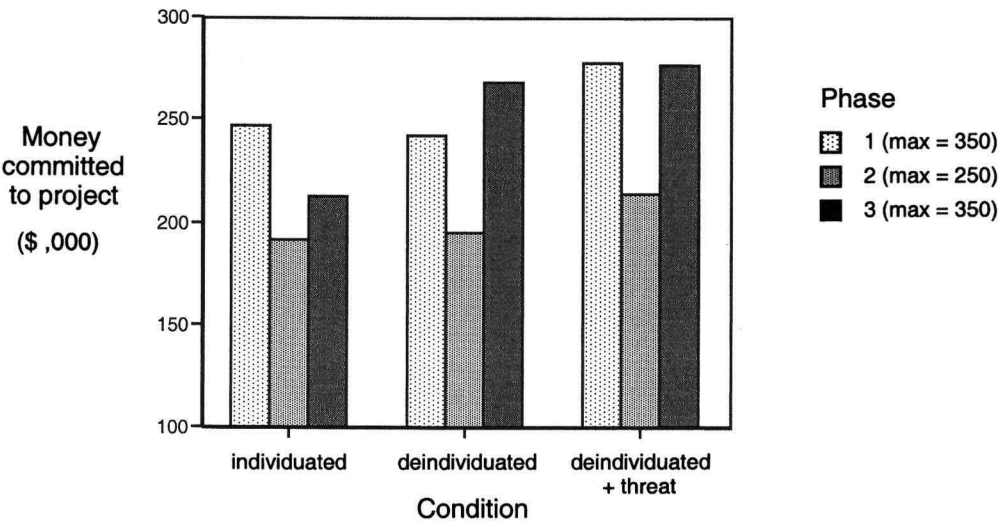

Figure 4: Money committed to childcare project as a function of condition and phase (from Haslam et al., 1998)

In light of the arguments presented above, the core prediction of the study was that individuals' willingness to remain committed to the project would depend upon the condition to which they had been assigned and would be stronger to the extent that their orientation to the decision-making process was informed by a social identity that they shared with other group members. As Figures 4 illustrates, this prediction was confirmed. Thus while participants in the individuated condition bailed out of the project as it started to falter, those in the two deindividuated conditions showed a willingness to stick to their guns and provide the injection of

capital necessary to see the project through to completion. Evidence on post-test measures also indicated that these effects were associated with social identity salience at the *initial* phase of the study. Thus while participants in the individuated condition actually came to see themselves more as a group as the study progressed, by the time that they did, their identity had already been formed around a decision *not* to proceed with the project — so this was the decision towards which they proceeded.

Reflecting on these results, it is of course the case that the utility of the end-product here is still open to question. What *was* the right decision for the groups in this study? To spend money on a public project of questionable value, or to preserve taxpayers money and invest it in more watertight ventures? To stick to one's financial knitting, or to make a brave decision that challenges the orthodoxies of 'economic rationalism'? Again, the answer must be that this depends. Ultimately too, it is clear that this is a political question and that the 'right' answer is a matter of political values and political judgement.

What the study does suggest though, is that processes of groupthink lead to outcomes that can be variously described as foolhardy or courageous, reckless or brave, imprudent or momentous, depending on one's point of view and one's place in history. If one's intention is to avoid any of these excesses and to preserve the status quo at all costs, then one might be well-advised to adopt the anti-group strategies recommended by Janis and his colleagues. The question I want to address by way of conclusion though, concerns the *sustainability* of this strategy at both social and organizational levels (cf. Haslam, in press a).

Concluding remarks

Looking over the range of observations made in preceding sections, it should be clear that processes of individuation and group-based deindividuation are associated with two radically different forms of organizational behaviour. Traditionally too, researchers have been very clear about which of these is the more desirable. Deindividuation leads to the organizational ills of soldiering, information over-sampling and groupthink, but individuation leads to optimal productivity, rational information exchange and decision-making prudence. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that — in the interests of greater efficiency and industrial harmony — organizational theorists are generally keen to recommend practices that individualize workers over those that create social bonds and intergroup division. Indeed, even if the productive potential of teams is recognized (e.g., as it is by Lembke & Wilson, 1998; van Knippenberg, in press; van Knippenberg & van Schie, in press), practitioners generally remain very wary of groups and counsel managers to keep a tight rein on their form and structure lest things get out of hand. As Stein (1982, p. 146) puts it:

> Managers need, therefore, to be aware that their subordinates might well profit from the facilitating effects of group membership. At the same time, however, they need to be aware of steamroller tactics, in which the group may become overstimulated and oversell itself.

At a political level, it is not hard to see why individuating tactics have widespread appeal amongst those who own and control organizations. After all, they preserve the status quo, the sanctity of the manager's 'right to manage', and feed into an ideology which justifies that right as a principle of individual superiority. Managers manage (and are to be rewarded for managing) because they are made of the 'right stuff' — the individual skills in areas of productivity, information management, and decision-making that the organization supposedly needs.

The goal of this paper has not been to discredit this political analysis, or even to present an alternative one. Instead it has been to show that the psychological analysis that serves to buttress these arguments is largely unsustainable — primarily because it is driven by a very partial political perspective on the psychological processes in question. Moreover, once we expose this fact, it is clear that psychological processes that are routinely maligned in the organizational literature can be seen in a fresh light. Specifically, we see that there is nothing inherently good or bad about processes of soldiering, information over-sampling and groupthink — instead they merely contribute to distinctive forms of organizational behaviour that are implicated in the creative development and expression of collective values and goals.

In the final analysis we therefore have to ask ourselves whether we want organizational and social life to allow for the possibility of group-based collective action — not just by the groups to which we belong and whose values and goals we share, but also by those of which we disapprove. At first blush this may seem to be a hard choice, but in fact it turns out not to be a choice at all. This is because *authentic social and organizational diversity* — psychologically grounded in deindividuation (or more precisely, *depersonalization*, Turner, 1982) and the attendant possibility of collective action — is the essential mechanism that guards against the twin dangers of an organizational monculture and uncorrectable social error (see Haslam, in press a, in press b). In this way, *deindividuation in the form social identification* lies at the very heart of what it means to be, *and to continue being,* human. It should also be seen as the very cornerstone of *sustainable organizational psychology.*

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