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Groupthink Phenomenon as a Common Occurrence in Juvenile Gangs

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Abstract

In this presentation, groupthink phenomenon is defined. Its symptoms specified in the related literature are cited. Then, a typical youth gang is related to each of those specific symptoms. The result depicts a high probability that such a gang may fall into groupthink, indeed!

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1. Introduction

The following analysis pertains to delinquent gangs, which are essentially an aspect of urban life style in western societies. However, such gangs are getting more and more common in Turkish big cities also. As early as two decades ago a prominent avenue in Istanbul, Bagdat Caddesi, was shaken by juvenile gang terror. Many local press articles dealt with news stories involving high school students who carry knives and even guns and who engage in gang-fights.

When a “small, cohesive group” indulges in “errors and mistakes of judgment” by not acknowledging wrong decisions, it means that the group is in groupthink. Such a group “clearly underestimates the strength of the other side” (Huse & Bowditch, 1977: 176).

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President John Kennedy and his associates were known to fall in groupthink in the affaire of the Gulf of Pigs and Cuban crisis. Since nobody in the president's close circle wanted to oppose the generally accepted view and thus fall from favor; it is possible that even some keen-minded ones must have played along. The unsuccessful landing of the fugitive Cuba citizens with a view to overthrow the communist regime only proved to be a disaster and the story is widely employed as a classical example of groupthink in textbooks on behavioral and management sciences.

2. Symptoms of Groupthink and Their Occurrence in Juvenile Gangs

Symptoms of groupthink are given by co-authors Wexley & Yuki (1984: 147-148) as follows:

- Illusion of invulnerability
- Rationalization of negative information
- Stereotyping of out-groups
- Assumption of morality
- Self-censorship
- Illusion of unanimity.
- Mind-guards
- Direct social pressure

A delinquent gang is very cohesive, indeed, to begin with. As Neisser & Ridenour (1960: 17) put it “the sign of the delinquent gang is the almost blind loyalty between [among] its members”.

Often the phony feeling of invulnerability is also there. Even the fearful name of the gang reflects this. The members' athletic capabilities must surely add to this feeling.

“Some delinquent gangs require trials of strength or endurance for admission” (Neisser & Ridenour 1960: 18). Cortes and Gatti (1972: 191) also confirm the association between superior physical built and potential aggressiveness.

Since gangs flourish predominantly in slum areas, lower class culture makes its play in the gang mentality. Here, as Miller (1968) puts it; virtues like toughness, smartness and trouble (1) are focal concerns.

In the case of a Turkish street gang, the trouble-seeking feature is probably even more exaggerated. This might be deduced from the following reasoning: A common trait of Turkish society is to be seen in the challenge motifs present in the folklore. As Tugrul (1969: 70) points out, in anonymous Turkish literature, many tales descending from the ancestors through the verbal culture involve some examination patterns for trying a person's capabilities like ordering accomplishment of difficult tasks (ordeals), testing one's loyalty, arranging bets or competitions to determine the best candidate etc.

An over-zealous trouble-seeker almost automatically ignores negative information or his mind processes it differently. The second item in the groupthink symptoms list is thus "fulfilled".

As for the third item, regarding “stereotyping of out-groups”, here too, many aspects of gangs hold true: “As a consequence of 'toughness', higher class men (the opposing camp, the hostile party) are commonly characterized with effeminate labels”. Moreover Miller (1968) —with a Freudian outlook— specifies that the lower class concern with masculinity lies in the fact that many lower class males were reared by mothers in broken homes.

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