

## Social Psychology



### Group Decision Making

During the life of any group, the members are likely to be involved in making decisions that affect them by virtue of their being a member of that group. For example, you might be involved in deciding where you and your group of friends go on holiday after your A levels. The extent of the individual involvement in the group decision is going to vary, with some people contributing more in various ways than others. Nevertheless, regardless of the amount of involvement in the decision-making process, the decision that is made affects every individual in the group.

The group decision making process will be affected by a range of factors, including

- the nature of the task
- the roles of individuals in the group and
- the status of those people.
- the extent of the group's cohesiveness (and possible groupthink) - See other handouts

#### Nature of the task

Steiner (1972, 1976) suggests that the performance of a group in making a decision must be considered in the light of the kind of tasks faced by the group. He classified tasks on the basis of three questions, resulting in a typology of 9 kinds of task.

Question	Answer	Task type	Examples
Can the task be subdivided or is this inappropriate?	Subtasks <b>can</b> be identified	<i>Divisible</i>	Playing a basketball game, building a house, preparing a meal
	No subtasks exist	<i>Unitary</i>	Pulling on a rope, reading a book
Which is more important, quantity produced or quality of product?	Quantity	<i>Maximizing</i>	Generating many ideas, lifting the greatest weight
	Quality	<i>Optimizing</i>	Generating the best idea, getting the right answer

How are individuals' inputs related to the group's product?	Individual inputs are added together	<i>Additive</i>	Pulling a rope, tidying a room
	Group product is the average of individual judgements	<i>Compensatory</i>	Deciding what the room temperature is by averaging individual estimates
	Group selects product from pool of individual suggestions	<i>Disjunctive</i>	Deciding where to go for a meal, deciding what the capital of Mongolia is
	All members contribute to product	<i>Conjunctive</i>	Climbing a mountain, going on holiday
	Group can decide how individual inputs relate to a group product	<i>Discretionary</i>	Deciding to vote on how to study, deciding that your teacher and not your peers should mark your tests (or vice versa)

Adapted from Steiner (1972, 1976)

For example, a tug-of-war involves a task which is unitary, maximizing and additive. Assembling a car is divisible, optimizing and conjunctive. Solving a problem such as how a group should study something is unitary, optimizing and discretionary. Steiner's classification helps us see how individuals interact in the group. It also helps to predict group performance and how the group will decide. The different classes of task involve different resources: skills, abilities and tools. For example, in a task where the group has to decide how to study, a skill demonstrated might be someone being persuasive, an ability might be being able to hear what's going on in the discussion and a tool might be the relevant information in a text or handout. If the group has these resources then it should be successful.

### Roles of individuals in the group

Some people may not be motivated to work towards the group goal, especially if individuals' contributions are not identifiable. This can lead to the **free-rider effect** where the group product or decision is negatively affected by some individual(s) withholding their contribution (whether it's a skill, ability or tool). A similar phenomenon is **social loafing** (Latane et al 1979). This is where individuals put in less effort when working in the group than they do when working on their own. It differs from free-riding in that the group is not simply carrying someone but the effect of the group on the individual is negative. Latane et al showed that the average number

of ideas per individual generated by a group in brainstorming was less than the average number of ideas generated by brainstorming alone.

When we work with others, we don't do this in a random way but with some kind of expectations about our conduct. These **social roles** apply to all members of the group and their behaviour is determined by such roles, the standards expected and norms operating in the group. If someone behaves out of role then the group may impose **sanctions** in order to bring them back into line. These are some kind of punishment or rejection ranging from mild disapproval to being banned or denied some right. A detention for not handing in your coursework on time would be a sanction. Some members of the group may act as **role models**, demonstrating approved behaviours. Such people often have high status in the group (see below).

Roles in groups can be fairly consistent, such that a given individual has the same kind of role throughout the life of the group. In Bales' (1950) **interaction process analysis (IPA)**, trained observers listen to group discussion and break it down into small units to distinguish each unit into one of the following 12 categories of speech. (See table below). Bales found that two roles or specialists emerged: **task specialists** are concerned with reaching the goal/solving the problem/making the decision whereas the **socio-emotional specialists** are more concerned with how members of the group get on with each other. The table shows that socio-emotional leaders are those who initiate positive socio-emotional behaviours (categories 1-3) and information exchange (categories 7-9) more frequently than others whilst receiving most information about the task (categories 4-6). In contrast, the task specialist is identified by initiating most task behaviour (categories 4-6), being asked for information (categories 7-9) and being on the receiving end of negative socio-emotional behaviour (categories 10-12).

It is unusual for one person to perform both roles, according to Bales. Apart from it being rare that one person has the skills to be able to do this, the functions of the two specialisms are sometimes contradictory. For example, the task specialist's insistence on moving towards the goal may cause hostility and the socio-emotional specialist's role might be to express this hostility. If these functions were taken on by one person he or she would effectively be saying 'Get on with it!' in one breath and 'Stop telling us to get on with it!' in the next. However, Burke (1967, 1974) has reported that both specialisms can be performed by one person during a one-hour discussion so long as the group is quite clear from the beginning that good task performance is more important than getting on with each other.

Bales's IPA categories	<i>Socio-emotional specialists</i>		<i>Task specialists</i>	
	<i>Initiates</i>	<i>Receives</i>	<i>Initiates</i>	<i>Receives</i>
<i>Socio-emotional behaviour (positive)</i>				
<b>1 Show solidarity</b>	X	X		
<b>2 Shows tension release</b>	X	X		
<b>3 Agrees</b>	X			X
<i>Task behaviour</i>				
<b>4 Gives suggestion</b>		X	X	
<b>5 Gives opinion</b>		X	X	
<b>6 Gives orientation</b>		X	X	
<i>Information exchange</i>				
<b>7 Asks for orientation</b>	X			X
<b>8 Asks for opinion</b>	X			X
<b>9 Asks for suggestion</b>	X	X		X
<i>Socio-emotional behaviour (negative)</i>				
<b>10 Disagrees</b>			X	X
<b>11 Shows tension</b>	X			X
<b>12 Shows antagonism</b>			X	X

Mintzberg (1980) put forward a categorization of different roles that can be used by group members (particularly managers in this case):

*Interpersonal roles*

- figurehead** perform symbolic duties
- leader** motivating others to work toward the goal and establishing a beneficial atmosphere

**liaison** maintaining contact with outside to obtain resources

*Informational roles*

**monitor** collects information from within the group to facilitate group functioning

**disseminator** gives out information to the group

**spokesperson** gives information to the outside world

*Decisional roles*

**entrepreneur** changes the group in order to adapt to changes in the outside world

**disturbance handler** handles disturbances or other unseen events

**negotiator** bargains with individuals or outside world

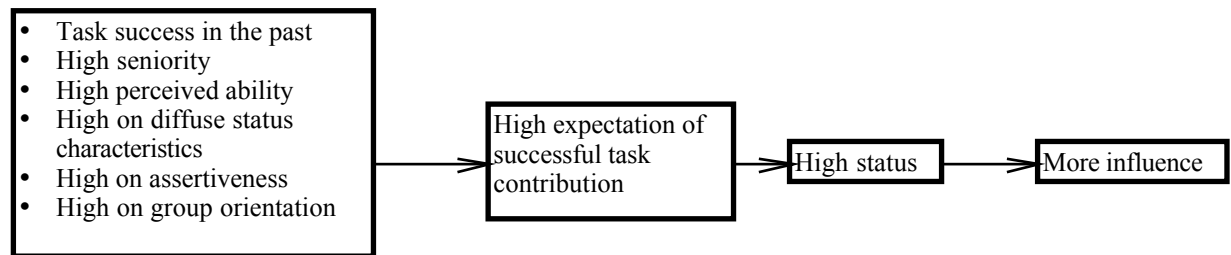
### Status

Group members will have different skills, abilities and access to different tools (including knowledge), some of which will be more relevant to task completion than others. Access to these resources in turn gives rise to the development of status organization within the group. Berger et al's (1980) *expectation-states theory* suggests that group members prior to their involvement in a group will have expectations about the relative importance of individuals within the group. Those with higher status are expected to contribute most to aspects of the task, are addressed more and encouraged to take more initiatives. Those with lower status will comply more (Wilke et al 1988). Each group member begins to engage in a process of identifying those individuals who have most to contribute to the task at hand. As different members are likely to emphasise different aspects of the task (some being more concerned to have a good time, some concerned with productivity/getting the job done, and so on), they ascribe status to different individuals depending on those individuals' roles. Of course, where information about status (i.e. access to resources, relevance of roles to task) is unavailable, groups still tend to develop a status pattern but it is based on diffuse characteristics such as age, sex, race, wealth, perceptions of educational attainment, perceptions of others' ascription of status and so on. The organization of status then becomes very complex.

Evidence for expectation-states theory comes from Greenstein et al (198) who found that someone with more ability is more influential than someone with a lower ability and Ofshe and Lee (1980) showed that those who are assertive are more influential than those who are less assertive (sounds like a circular definition to me though). Ridgeway found that those who are most focused on the group's activities are more likely to be influential.

This perspective explains why groups with no formal structure initially do develop a structure. Veen and Wilke (1984) summarise the research to show the characteristics

which give rise to high status, more influence on task performance and decision making in groups.



Status differences do not always contribute positively to the group's decision making and performance, however. Groupthink can operate whereby the group comes to a consensus decision due to pressure to make a decision, rather than due to the need to make the right decision. (You have covered groupthink elsewhere). In a study using airforce personnel as subjects, Torrance (1954) found that not only were higher status individuals (pilots) more effective than were lower status individuals (navigators and gunners) in persuading lower status individuals of the correct answer, but also higher status individuals were more effective in persuading lower status individuals to accept incorrect answers. So, as Wilke et al (1988 p.336) state, "a high-status person who is on the wrong track is a bigger obstacle for group success than an equally mistaken low-status person".

### Summary

In observing group decision making processes, we need to examine the ways in which the nature of the task faced by the group can be influential, identify various roles occupied by individuals in relation to the decision making and monitor the construction and organization of status within the group.

Gathering data about group decision making faces two major methodological difficulties. Firstly, the observer will have socio-cultural expectations (just like any other person who is approaching a group) and so can never be entirely objective in identifying and recording the events in the group. Working in the ethogenic approach, Harre suggests that "instead of just looking at individual utterances in conversations, ...we should look at whole conversations in terms of their social meaning - for participants and for others too" (Hayes p. 525).

The second difficulty is that group interactions are notoriously complex events and monitoring activities/inactivities of members is very complex, especially when considering sub-cultural styles of communication. For instance, raising an eyebrow may be okay in one context but in another it could get you into more trouble than you bargain for. How does the observer record what goes on when it may not be clear even to the group what's going on?