

This is an excerpt from Ken Eisold's book, What You Don't Know You Know: Our Hidden Motives in Life, Business, and Everything Else, to be published in January 2010 by Other Press.

<http://www.keneisold.com/>

The book explores what Eisold calls the "New Unconscious," an expanded and updated view of the motives operating outside of awareness that shape our behavior in many domains of life. One domain that is of particular interest to members of AKRI has to do with group membership and the unconscious constraints that our need to belong imposes on us.

Unconscious Belonging

This is the domain of the unconscious that is perhaps least recognized and appreciated in our culture. Our historic, embedded focus on the individual has meant that we idealize and reward our leaders, our winners, our geniuses and heroes. Seldom are committees singled out for praise. Indeed it is a widespread conviction among us that groups thwart the individual, impede action, waste time.

And, often, that is true – mysteriously and unfortunately true. We continue to work and meet in groups, which are indispensable for accomplishing work, and we seldom understand how their unconscious actions get in our way. I said "their" actions, but, obviously, their actions are also our actions, our actions under the constraints and invisible pressures of group membership. Groups provide insidious opportunities for us to thwart our own best intentions and derange our well thought out plans. In the Introduction, we saw an example of "groupthink" at work in the disastrous decisions of President Kennedy's advisors preparing for the Bay of Pigs invasion. A group of brilliant men with access to extraordinary information as well as exceptional resources blinded themselves to simple facts and obvious dangers. Not taking into account their own vulnerability to the difficulties and dangers of group membership, they brought on a near catastrophe.¹

Somewhat as individuals maneuver unconsciously to protect self-esteem, groups collectively neglect to pay attention to the information and ideas that threaten their cohesion, that contradict what they want to believe or are afraid not to believe. In this case, differing points of view were minimized, disparaged, ridiculed, and finally, just ignored. Something resembling a delusional state takes over.

Here we are in the presence of the deepest paradox of group life: working together, group members can be creative and productive, achieving far more collectively than they possibly could working as separate individuals; on the other hand, groups can lead their members to be out of touch with reality, destructive and deluded. We can have, on the one hand, brilliantly functioning teams, pooling their thoughts, spurring each other on to

new and better ideas; on the other, we can have what happened among Kennedy's advisors in the Bay of Pigs debacle or among executives at Enron.

Should we think of the processes that produce these different outcomes as a piling up of individual motives, a concatenation of parallel factors operating in the separate group members? Or as a process engaging the group as a whole, a kind of social or tribal instinct?

Darwin argued in The Descent of man, that if members of a tribe were always ready to aid one another, sacrificing themselves for the common good, they would inevitably be victorious over other tribes.ⁱⁱ He believed that such a social instinct aided natural selection, especially when operating within the family unit. It may be true that we have a tendency to submerge our individual interests for the sake of a larger goal. His concept of a "social instinct" remains an interesting hypothesis.

It may also be that the size and complexity of the groups we inhabit add a challenge to cognition, as Howard Gardiner noted in reminding cognitive scientists of George Miller's seminal essay, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two." Miller observed that there are limits to our ability to keep complex streams of information distinct in our minds. Faced with too much complexity, we "chunk" the bits together into wholes we can process, at the expense of precision or even accuracy. In groups, particularly larger groups, such "chunking" means that we lump people together as we try to grasp the shifting complexities of group dynamics.

On the other hand, as we chunk others, inevitably others chunk us, with the result that we are all more likely to feel that we are in the presence of strangers, unseen and alone. Such anonymity easily leads to counter-productive forms of "regressive" behavior, resentment, and impulsiveness in larger groups. As a result, not only do we fear large groups, our own behavior in large groups gives us ample grounds for being afraid. Mobs and crowds have provided all too many illustrations of the power of coordinated destructive mass behavior.ⁱⁱⁱ

More recently, there has been significant interest in applying complexity or "chaos" theory to understanding group processes. Chaos theory notes the self-organizing properties of large systems, suggesting that there may well be ways in which individuals interacting with each other, under certain conditions, produce spontaneously emerging patterns of integration. Schools of fish appear to coordinate their movements spontaneously, as do flocks of birds. Ants, termites, and bees have evolved extraordinarily intricate societies, clearly without consciousness or central planning. Perhaps comparable tropisms or mechanisms underlie our group dynamics.

Ralph Stacey, a professor of management in the UK, has argued that groups can be viewed as complex responsive processes, a point of view that helps to account for their creative capacity to develop new ideas. If we conceptualize "groups" as occasions in which collections of individual minds engage in common projects, we highlight the processes through which the interactions of conversation, what George Herbert Mead

called “conversational gestures,” produce emergent structures. From this perspective, groups are neither simple collections of individual minds, nor are individual minds merely contained in groups. Paradoxically, minds shape the process of the group at the same time that they are shaped by those very processes as individual gestures interact. From interaction, new integrations continuously occur.

Stacey refers to the work of Prigogine and his concept of “dissipative structures:”

Models representing a critical degree of micro diversity. . . take on a life of their own, in which their future is under perpetual construction through the micro interactions of the diverse entities comprising them. The ‘final’ form to which it moves is not given in the model itself, nor is it being chosen from outside the model. The forms continually emerge in an unpredictable way in the interaction of the entities comprising the system.^{iv}

A similar point has been made recently by James Surowiecki, in accounting for how groups, free to process information randomly, generally arrive at astonishingly accurate results. He gives the example of a contest to judge the number of jelly-beans in a jar. Time and time again, while the individual guesses vary tremendously, the average of the guesses turns out to be correct. The collective is able to generate wisdom – or, at least, an amazing degree of accuracy.^v

Chaos theory, cognitive chunking and social instincts may work to describe processes that occur when our minds are free to move of their own accord, without interference, without disruption or “noise.” Theories of emergent structure or automatic computation might well explain how flocks of birds fly in formation or schools of fish dart about in the water with exquisite coordination, or how a group of separately acting individuals who are not bumping up against each other or competing for attention can come up with the correct number of jelly beans in a jar. When it comes to human behavior, however, movement without turbulence is the exception. Individuals who feel threatened will oppose processes of synthesis, or joint resistances will arise within subgroups promoting different agendas and disrupt the prevailing flow towards integration.

Two kinds of motives can arise in individuals that profoundly disrupt group processes, introducing perturbations that derail a group’s capacity for cooperation and synthesis. Briefly, they are anxieties that individual members feel about being included or accepted in the group and anxieties about failing at the task they have come together to perform.

The desire for approval is likely to be stronger among members of a teenage clique or gang than in a group of presidential advisors, but few people are immune to the pressures of feeling included or, worse, the danger of being extruded. Without consciously trying to adjust our behavior, we attend to the subtle signs of opportunity or danger in being accepted and belonging. Confronted with the existence of such a motive, many of us would deny it, try to suppress it or try to correct it unobtrusively. Such motives may seem childish, stupid and embarrassing, but they are there.

A related set of individual motives has to do with identity. More adult or sophisticated group members may not be satisfied with mere inclusion, requiring recognition for their specific identities in order to feel secure. I suggested that Kennedy's advisors had identities as cold warriors to sustain, identities embedded in their former roles, outside connections, and public positions. If a group fails to affirm such identities or, even, if it raises the possibility that they may be threatened or challenged, members will fight to protect and reaffirm them. Threats to an existing common identity in a group can become experienced as a danger to the group itself, eliciting an unconscious collusion to act together defensively.

Typically, groups find ways of accommodating different identities, providing a sense of security to members as a pre-condition to active engagement. Only when a group has gone through a stage of formation, in which the identities of members have been established, recognized and accepted, can the group usually feel secure enough to work at its purpose. The identity needs of group members can also lead groups to subdivide, each subgroup offering its members a sense of belonging, though often at the expense of the cohesion of the whole or its ability to pursue its task. Often a quick glance around a roomful of people engaged in a meeting will show the group divided by gender, age or ethnicity, as coalitions emerge and form unconsciously around issues of identity. The women sit together, for example, or minorities in the back.

And then there are the anxieties that the group will not be able to succeed at the purpose for which it was established, especially if the task itself is challenging or risky. Moreover, work can be impeded by a lack of needed resources, poor organization, incompetence, changes in the external environment, competing versions of the task that cause members to work at cross purposes, etc. The group's inability to work at its task will render it demoralized and anxious, searching for scapegoats or for some means of escape from its dilemma. Desperation provokes a vicious circle: groups unable to function get more anxious, which causes them to seek stronger defenses, which, in turn, renders them yet less able to face reality and function at their task, and so on....

If we look at any system through the lens of social instincts or chaos theory, we can discern the potential for the system to organize itself in an effective manner. Without anxiety, without competing needs for different subgroups in the system, without external threats and the danger of internal accidents, the system might have functioned smoothly. It contained all the information and resources it needed. But anxiety elicited perturbations in the system, profoundly affecting its ability to function.

The lesson in the management of groups, then, is the importance of paying attention to anxieties in the group and the various defensive maneuvers to which they give rise. Unblocking defenses is the key to restoring the emergent processes, allowing the group more fully to engage its work.

Notes

ⁱ Irving Janis described this situation in depth in his book, Groupthink. (2nd Edition, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.)

ⁱⁱ Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, 2nd edition (New York: American Home Library, 1974), p. 179.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Howard Gardiner, The Mind's New Science, pp 89-91. Miller's essay, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on our Capacity for Processing Information," was published in The Psychological Review, 1956. Pierre Turquet has also called attention to this phenomenon in "Threats to Identity in the Large Group." The Large Group, Kreeger, ed. Constable, London: 1975. (Reprinted by Maresfield Reprints.) The seminal paper on this phenomenon is, of course, Freud's Massenpsychologie, somewhat mistranslated as Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.

^{iv} Ralph D. Stacey, Complexity and Group Process (New York: Bruner-Routledge, 2003), p. 47, 48. The concept of "conversational gestures" is borrowed from the work of George Herbert Mead.

^v The Wisdom of Crowds (New York: Doubleday, 2004).