

Hans Gordon:

Group Think

“In order to understand how a group functions we have to see it as an independent organism with a soul, a group soul that acts according to rules that are subconscious for group members. It is these never-acknowledged norms that have the power.”

From the *Eleventh Conspiracy* by Ann and Marianne Fredriksson

A DEAFENING SILENCE hung over the cinema auditorium. I was young and thirsted after knowledge of man's strengths and shortcomings. I was deeply moved by the film. One person dared to question what the other eleven took for granted. The eleven wanted the process out of the way so they could go home. It was hot and sweaty in the closed room and it was an open and shut case, nothing to discuss. It was obvious that the 18-year-old, who was also from the slum and had Latin American blood, was guilty. It was him and nobody else who had killed the father. Case closed.

But the twelfth jury member went against the grain. There was reasonable doubt. The decision must be unanimous. The twelfth member refused to give in to group pressure. Stubbornly he held on to his doubt and argued his case.

To find out the outcome you will have to see *12 Angry Men* filmed in 1957 by debut producer Sidney Lumet with Henry Fonda in the main role. The film was based on a play by Reginald Rose and is an all-time classic.

American social psychologist Irving Janis came into the public eye in the 1960s with his studies on how people are affected by scaremongering propaganda. In the early 1980s he refined his analytical investigations through powerful events in the USA and other parts of the world in a book he entitled *Groupthink*. Primarily, he attempted to put his finger on how President John F Kennedy, his administration and military staff could even consider the fruitless attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro as a means of crushing the Communist Party. The year was 1961 and the Bay of Pigs intermezzo ended in total fiasco, something that should, and could, have been foreseen by more moderate analysts.

Emanating from this event, Irving Janis describes typical examples of how many groups create illusions of grandeur that are underpinned by an exaggerated devaluation of others. This could lead to group members going out on a limb to take completely unrealistic risks. The group is thus a production workshop of delusions with accompanying actions.

How normal is this? Very normal. At time of writing we find ourselves in the midst of a financial crisis that was provoked by banks and other loan institutions gradually raising their risk stakes. They generously lent money that they did not possess. The opportunity for a quick profit became an insatiable craving far removed from common sense and rational considerations. Money rules! When the house of cards began to tumble they panicked, and group mass hysteria spread like wildfire and got the whole world shaking.

In order to really understand this we have to bring in the word angst. Angst is a description of an often undefined fear. That it is undefined has to do with it not relating to anything we consider to be tangible or clearly dangerous. If we get lost in the woods while picking mushrooms we could gradually begin to feel a justifiable fear. If our car skids and we slide sideways towards the oncoming traffic we feel fear. If we are subjected to a brutal assault by somebody who obviously wants to hurt us we are gripped by panic. These types of feelings should not be associated with angst. Angst can come over us when we least expect it. It can come during the hour of the wolf or when we open the front door and step out into the street on an ordinary sunny day, or when cooking dinner. Suddenly, or gradually, we feel anxiety that rises and rises, and the body reacts with adrenaline secretion and a quicker pulse and the hair on our arms, the remains of our animal fur, begins to rise.

You look around but there is nothing out of the ordinary. You listen for sounds but hear nothing special. The brain begins to work overtime processing the information that the body is generating. It offers suggestions. Something could be happening, out there. You consider putting on the radio in case something serious has happened. Perhaps you should call your parents or children or somebody else close to you. Something could have happened. But nothing has. Everything is as normal. But is it? You have suddenly or gradually begun to feel angst.

Where does it come from? What is its source?

The source is everywhere. It namely consists of all that has accumulated that we have not understood and which we have therefore not structured and stored in our memory. What we do not understand is that we have experienced several, large and small, often greatly charged antagonisms that have pursued conflict, not externally and clear, but internally and unclear. Life is full of these complicated, contrasting experiences. And you are part of it every time.

No? You do not recognise it? That is because you, like most people around you, use a rapid, powerful and mental defence mechanism. You suppress it, rearrange it, explain it away, deny it, do everything in your power to get an experience that is less complicated and which does not generate such inner turbulence. Often, we flee back into our life history and search for someone or something we hope will free us or give us comfort. In psychology language this is called regression. The source of your angst and your defence mechanism against it belongs to your subconscious so you will naturally not recognise it.

The mental defences that you as an individual uses are also used by groups, in most cases in strengthened form. It is from this perspective that we should view Janis's research and the term groupthink. Groupthink stands for the group's deviations from the rational, the translucent, the well thought-out, where the group members together produce fantasies, exaggerated, sometimes megalomaniac, sometimes understated, carping self-pity. Sometimes the group can rise up, flex its muscles and exert its invincibility only to do the opposite in other situations, where it claims to know nothing and should therefore qualify for great, mostly financial, support from Granny State. Sometimes the group's groupthink pulls all the members onto the sofa where they make clear that they

cannot manage anymore or do not have time, especially for anything extra, only to in the next breath accelerate to pole position in a sudden perceived fist come, first served competitive situation.

Groups can in this way swing from an almost omnipotent activity to a more depressive phase and then up and it again. All this bears the hallmark of most small or somewhat older children, and groups can develop the exact same patterns. Many times it puts a regressive defence up against a group's inherent angst, which in its turn relates to the group and its members being, or having been, subjected to a great deal of more or less subconscious conflicts and friction.

But enough of this, we can't sit in this stuffy room for ever. The boy is obviously guilty! Can we agree on that? Shall we say so? Is anybody against?

The majority agree. Some look down at the table. The sun is blazing down outside the window. Somebody says he's going to take a beer after this. Can we make a decision?

But then that stubborn devil says he can't go along with that. He wants to go another round, take another look at everything that is against the kid and everything in his favour.

In the film he becomes the hero.

In the reality you live in, who are you?