

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Groupthink, Group Mind

Cultural Daily · Thursday, February 23rd, 2012

What do the following scenarios have in common?

- A football stadium erupts in cheers when the home team scores.
- An army advances towards the enemy in a battle.
- A family watches TV together.
- Two people meet, fall in love, get married, stay together for life.
- Twelve poker players glare at each other as the final table of a tournament begins.
- A fire department storms into a burning building and saves several lives.
- A group of marine scientists and ecologists rescue a shoreline from an oil spill.
- Members of a small town church gather for a weekend's worship.
- A high school drama department puts on a musical play.
- A political party conducts an intensive national voter drive on election day.
- A classroom gathers for a teacher's lesson.

Let's also throw in these somewhat different situations, and look at them in a similar light:

- A person cries alone in an empty apartment after a bad romantic breakup.
- A captured war criminal sits on a witness stand in court, and says "I was just following orders."
- An employee is laid off, and slinks away silently from the office where she's worked for years.
- A person sits at a computer hitting "refresh" repeatedly on Facebook, hoping to see something new pop up on the Friends stream.
- A person leaves a crowded city for a day to climb a mountain alone, then sits at the peak for hours enjoying the view.



What do all these scenarios have in common? In all of these cases, an outside observer who wishes to understand exactly what is taking place will have to consider not only the isolated thoughts and motivations of each individual person, but also the dynamics of the group as a whole. Each person in each scenario has a private set of feelings, desires, fears, ideals, motivations. But the group itself seems to exert a strong force, often creating a sense that the group has its own feelings, desires, fears, ideals and motivations separate from those of each individual in the group. As the activity plays out, the intentions of the group will often take precedence over the intentions of each individual in the group.

A family watches TV together. Two of them want to watch a comedy, one wants to watch basketball, one wants to watch a cooking show. They flicker through the channels and find

“American Idol”. No mathematical equation of (2 * comedy) + basketball + cooking could possibly equal “American Idol”, and in fact none of them would enjoy watching this show if they were alone. But they do enjoy watching it together, and the next night they happily gather in the same room to do it again.

A few months ago, some startling images of North Koreans crying at president Kim Jong Il’s funeral became an Internet/TV news sensation. Because North Korea is a secretive, isolated and paranoid nation, these photos and videos offered a rare glimpse into the lives and personalities of the country’s unknown citizens. But their extreme weeping and moaning took many outside observers aback; this was not what we expected to see at Kim Jong Il’s funeral. What was the meaning of this intense crying? The question could be answered a few different ways, depending on your attitude towards the Communist government of North Korea.

Were they crying because they were impoverished, miserable and oppressed by an evil dictatorship?

Were they crying because their beloved dear leader Kim Jong Il had died? This must have been the North Korean government’s intended interpretation when it sent these images out, though for those of us who have only heard of Kim Jong Il as a brutal dictator this interpretation seemed hard to credit. (Then again, we know very little about this closed society, so we can’t be sure.)

My own initial interpretation when I first saw the pictures was a historical one: perhaps they were crying for the entire tragic history of their country over the last century? Korea had been the stomping ground of the terrible Russo-Japanese War, was brutally occupied by Japan before the Second World War, was then split from its southern half and brutally controlled by China, which led it into the ruinous and never-ended Korean War ... perhaps these citizens were crying for all their family members and loved ones tortured and killed, dreams crushed, hope denied? This seemed like a pretty good explanation for all the crying to me.

But later on, I came to a more subtle and more universal realization. They were crying because they were together.

It’s strange that it took so long for me to realize this, even though it’s fairly obvious. North Koreans must share the same instinct as humans everywhere else: if we are at a funeral or other sad occasion and observe other people crying, we will be moved to cry with them. Likewise, if we’re in a room of laughing people, we will laugh, and if we’re in a room of bored or irritated people we will be bored and irritated. It’s a mistake to overthink the spectacle of North Koreans crying, to try to read special insight about the culture of North Korea from this event. My own friends and neighbors here in the USA will probably be crying this weekend when they watch Whitney Houston’s funeral on TV.

Our original mistake, when we first tried to interpret and understand these strange funeral photos, was to consider only the workings of individual minds. When a group of people cry together, they are crying together. This gives us surprisingly little indication of what they are each thinking or feeling privately when they do so. We give ourselves over to groups constantly in our everyday lives, and when we think and feel and operate as a group, we are not following our individual thoughts and motivations but rather giving ourselves over to the group’s thoughts and motivations. This statement can be seen as wrongheaded, fantastical, staggeringly unscientific. At the same time, it can be seen as so obvious as to barely be worth saying. We all know that we think and feel and live in groups. We just lack the language and the shared psychological frameworks to permit us to analyze events at the group level, and so we fall back to the individual level even when the individual level of explanation doesn’t work. Why do we each sometimes behave in ways that we can’t explain? It’s a big question, and group psychology can often provide the answer.

Group psychology is not often discussed, and yet various clever political leaders and consumer marketing specialists have clearly figured out its power, and have been manipulating populations

with it. This is one of many reasons why we all need to better understand the powers of the group self, and the ways it affects all our lives. Is the group self a good thing, an evil thing, or both? Can a shared, relational awareness be insidious, oppressive, conformist? (This is derisively called “groupthink”.) Can a shared, relational awareness be spiritually uplifting, joyous, enlightening? (This is when we speak of a lofty “group mind”.)

Some of us enjoy the feeling of “groupness” more than others. Jack Kerouac once sneered at his friend Allen Ginsberg’s desire “for everybody in the world to take a bath in the same bathtub”. Sometimes the realization of the natural power of the group self can inspire us to want to reject it completely and deny every impulse towards our natural group sense, because it threatens to limit our individual freedom. This appears to be the primary impulse behind Ayn Rand’s popular philosophy of selfish ethics.

Anyone who wishes to explore the topic of the group self in public will have to deal with a lot of dissonance, misunderstanding and suspicion. (I have experienced this myself since I began writing about the topic.) The group self, it appears, is not yet ready to comprehend its own existence.

And yet, even when we deny or attack our tendencies towards “groupness”, we all fall in line with our own groups. Conservatives criticize liberals for pushing the “nanny state”, and liberals criticize conservatives for pushing “my country right or wrong”. I have recently heard conservatives in the USA virulently criticize our federal government for forcing laws about reproduction rights upon all its citizens; they are furious because they think each of the 50 states, rather than the single federal government, should be able to force laws about reproduction rights upon all its citizens. How dare the federal government take away my freedom to empower my state government to take away your freedom?

Groupthink. Group mind. These poorly understood terms point to great questions still unanswered, and the topic seems to be ripe for future discovery. That’s why I’ve been exploring these questions so obsessively on this blog for a [long time now](#). Today’s post is intended to wrap up my most recent outbreaks of posts on the topic; I plan to give it a rest now for the next few weeks, though I’ll surely return to my favorite topic again soon enough.

I’m not completely sure where I’ve been heading with this inquiry. But I’m glad that many of you have posted comments, questions and criticisms to help me work towards an answer, even though some of you have objected strongly and angrily to my conclusions. The truth is, I’m not as interested in coming to a conclusion at this point as I am in exploring the question from every possible angle. This is too big a controversy for me to handle alone. We need the power of a group mind on this case.

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This entry was posted on Thursday, February 23rd, 2012 at 5:47 am and is filed under [Fiction](#), [Lifestyle](#), [Technology](#)

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