CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed the popular perception of communication, which suggests that the communication process is paradoxically simple yet powerful. We defined communication as the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning. We then turned our attention to communication competence, indicating that competent communicators are those who can balance effectiveness and appropriateness. Next, we discussed the nature of theory. The distinctions between commonsense theories, working theories, and scholarly theories were addressed. Finally, we provided a means by which scholarly theories of communication can be evaluated, including accuracy, practicality, succinctness, consistency, and acuity.

Case Study 1: Evaluating Groupthink

Whether or not you know the details of the theory, it's likely that you've heard the term *groupthink*. Developed by Janis (1972), the notion of groupthink has bridged the gap from the realm of academics into popular culture. We performed a LexisNexis search of the term and found literally hundreds of hits during the past year, with the term being referenced in major newspapers, magazines, and even newsletters. Clearly the concept is being used—but is it being used the way that Janis intended? Read the following summary, and evaluate the theory using the criteria developed in this chapter.

Groupthink is a dysfunctional decision-making process that happens when group members are so focused on making a unanimous decision that they fail to fully analyze a problem (Janis, 1982). As such, groupthink was designed to explain and predict how bad decisions are made by groups. At its core, the notion of groupthink represents a failure of the group to demonstrate critical thinking. When groups "go along to get along," the end result of the decision-making process is likely to be less effective than if group members question the information at hand, being careful to look at the problem from a variety of perspectives.

Janis (1982) articulated three *antecedent conditions* to groupthink. According to Janis, these preexisting conditions make it more likely that groupthink will occur. Note that the existence of the antecedent conditions does not guarantee that groupthink will occur. Instead, these are what Janis calls "necessary but not sufficient" conditions. The antecedent conditions are high cohesion, structural flaws, and situational characteristics.

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First, *cohesion* refers to the degree of connection between group members, or a sense of solidarity (Janis, 1982). Because groupthink emphasizes the preservation of group harmony, a high degree of cohesion is necessary for groupthink to occur. Yet Janis's notion that cohesion might engender bad decision making is novel. Think about your own workplace; in how many "team-building" activities have you taken part? If you are a full-time student, how many of your classes have started with "icebreakers" so that the class might feel more connected to each other? Typically, workplace cohesion is viewed positively, but Janis warns that cohesion might make people reluctant to "rock the boat"; yet rocking the boat might be necessary to make the best possible decision.

The second antecedent condition, *structural flaws*, refers to problems with the way the group is organized (Janis, 1982). Janis identified four specific structural flaws—any one of which might lead to groupthink. First, *group insulation* means that the group is somehow isolated from the larger world. Perhaps they meet so frequently with each other and so infrequently with others outside the group that they are disconnected from the larger system. Perhaps the group hasn't had direct experience with the problem at hand. This insulation might lead to an inability to process adequately all of the information necessary to make an effective decision. The second structural flaw is *biased leadership*. If the leader already has his or her mind made up or has a personal stake in the decision, group members might defer to the leader simply because of the power differential, regardless of whether the leader's solution is good. Third, a *lack of procedural norms* can lead to groupthink. Not having a process in place for how to make a decision can happen either because the group has not taken the time to create the process or because the group fails to follow the process. In either case, following a standard process can prevent the group from inadvertently missing a key component of the decision-making process. Last, too much *homogeneity* is problematic. Homogeneity refers to similarity; group members who are very similar—in background, values, or beliefs—are less likely to challenge each other's ideas.

The third and final antecedent condition is *situational characteristics* (Janis, 1982). In short, groupthink is more likely to occur in times of *high stress*. This high stress might come from pressures from outside the group. Groups that work in the pharmaceutical industry experience stress from Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requirements. Television network executives experience pressures from advertisers. Sometimes external forces place undue pressure on the group through operating constraints, threats,

or legal requirements. High stress might also come in the form of *time pressures*; the more rapidly a decision has to be made, the less likely that all possible solutions have been adequately studied.

Stressors don't always come from outside the group, however (Janis, 1982). Groups that have experienced *recent failures* may lose confidence in their decision-making ability, and the loss of confidence might create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The final category of situational characteristics is *moral dilemmas*; if a group feels that the viable alternatives represent ethical challenges, they are more likely to fall prey to groupthink. Consider a situation where a group can come up with only three solutions to a problem, but two of the three are deemed ethically inappropriate—the group is likely to pursue the third option, regardless of how good it might be.

Again, these three antecedent conditions are necessary—but not sufficient—for groupthink. In other words, all three conditions must be present to some degree for groupthink to occur; however, simply because these circumstances exist doesn't guarantee the occurrence of groupthink. Instead, Janis (1982) argued that you have to examine how the group operates to observe *symptoms of the groupthink process*. He identified eight symptoms that are grouped into three categories: overestimation of the group, closed-mindedness, and pressure toward uniformity.

The first classification of symptoms falls into the category known as *overestimation of the group* (Janis, 1982). Overestimation occurs when group members have an inflated view of the group's abilities. Two specific symptoms to look for are *illusion of invulnerability* (a belief that the group won't or can't fail) and a belief in the *inherent morality of the group* (a belief that because the group is good, the decisions the group makes have to be good). Note that both of these symptoms are representative of a level of unwavering confidence in the group and its abilities. As such, group members might not feel it is necessary to critically analyze the decisions being made.

Janis (1982) labeled the second category of groupthink symptoms *closed-mindedness*. These symptoms demonstrate polarized thinking, which means viewing the world in extremes. Things are perceived either as good or bad, right or wrong. If they are good, they are wholly good; if they are bad, they are wholly bad. If a decision is right, it must be completely right. Two specific instances of this category are stereotyping out-groups and collective rationalization. First, *stereotyping* out-groups refers to the process of demonizing other groups and their leaders. Frequently, images of good and evil are invoked, such as former president George W. Bush's 2002 designation of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "axis of evil."

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When other groups are portrayed as uncompromisingly bad, it is easier to justify decisions that might put those groups in jeopardy. *Collective rationalization* means that the group members tend to justify their decisions by talking themselves into it. As an example, consider a group that spends only 5 minutes coming up with a solution and 25 minutes discussing why they are right in making the decision. Rather than critically analyze the decision, group members come up with a litany of reasons to defend why it's a good decision.

The third and final symptom of groupthink is organized around the notion of *pressure toward uniformity* (Janis, 1982). When groupthink occurs, it is not only because the group has an inflated view of themselves or because they demonstrate polarized thinking; it is also because individual group members actively suppress critical thinking. *Self-censorship* means that group members tend to keep their mouths shut when experiencing doubts. Often they feel as though everyone else is "on board" with the decision, so they are afraid to go out on a limb with their concerns. This tendency also highlights the *illusion of unanimity*, which means that group members perceive that consensus has been reached, even if it really hasn't. As such, silence tends to be interpreted as consent. In fact, *self-appointed mindguards* are careful not to present any contrary information, even if they know it exists; in other words, a self-appointed mindguard engages in self-censorship. If someone actually does question the decision, a group experiencing groupthink will often place *pressure on dissenters*; challenges to the group are squashed.

Janis developed his theory by analyzing six national political decisions, ranging from the positive (the Cuban Missile Crisis) to the negative (the Bay of Pigs). Despite how frequently the theory is referenced in both the academic and professional press, however, relatively little empirical research has sought to test the theory. At best this research has suggested limited support. Flowers (1977), Leana (1985), and Fodor and Smith (1982) tested part of the groupthink model and found support for those areas studied. Both Moorhead and Montanari (1986) and Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) found support for the proposition that groups with biased leaders were more likely to discourage dissent and fall prey to the illusion of morality, but in their studies such groups actually considered more alternatives, not fewer, as the theory would predict.

In his review of the theory, Baron (2005) concludes that Janis was "wrong about the antecedent conditions he specified . . . not only are these conditions not necessary to provoke the symptoms of groupthink, but they

often will not even amplify those symptoms" (p. 228). Yet, as Baron argues, the theory remains ubiquitous because it rings true for many people who have experienced faulty decision making: "The symptoms and mechanisms described by the model seem familiar to us. They echo group experiences we have experienced in our own social interactions" (p. 227). He concludes that the experience of groupthink accurately captures reality but that the theory does not accurately explain that reality. Perhaps the reason for this is conceptual ambiguity. Longley and Pruitt (1980) suggest that the antecedents and symptoms are not clearly distinguished from each other, making the theory unnecessarily complex. "A theory should be a logical progression of ideas, not a grab bag of phenomena that were correlated with each other in a sample of six cases" (Longley & Pruitt, 1980, p. 80).

Questions for Consideration

1. How accurate is groupthink? What evidence do you have to support your evaluation?
2. How practical is groupthink? Use the Web to see how the theory has been used.
3. Is the theory appropriately succinct? Or is it overly simple or overly complex? Why do you make this judgment?
4. Is groupthink consistent with other theories about group communication? Does it demonstrate internal consistency? Why or why not?
5. Does groupthink demonstrate acuity? Does it demonstrate an ability to explain a difficult real-world problem? Why or why not?