The Drawbacks of Group Decision Making from a Psychological Aspect: The Pitfalls of Groupthink and How to Handle Them

FARKAS Johanna[1]

In the field of law enforcement coordinated work is the basis of professional efficiency. That is the reason why being acquainted with social psychological processes, which can serve as obstacles in group decision making, is a must. Sometimes group thinking is present in closely united groups or cases of great significance. In these situations, individuals tend to overrate the viewpoint held by the group as opposed to theirs in order to negotiate with consent. The decision-maker team can see the agreement as inviolable not letting criticism intrude. In extreme cases this can create capital errors in decision. By being familiar with the mechanisms that go with group thinking these errors could be avoided and possible mistakes be fixed.

Keywords: *police leadership, group decision making, groupthink*

> *"If decision makers are too much alike in terms of worldview and thinking patterns then they will get trapped by group-think… They are susceptible to argue and decline possible counter-arguments and be confident that stressing the difference in opinions is not useful."* – James Surowiecki

In the late 70s, several states in the USA were kept in fear by a charming, nice and handsome young man, who stood in court accused of multiple homicide and necrophilia. The public opinion in the USA was divided thanks to his looks and his life that seemed exemplary on the surface. The case of Ted Bundy teaches several lessons, especially the circumstances of his arrest, as far as the subject of our study is concerned. The investigators were blindly trying to find the serial killer when Detective Jerry Thompson's attention was raised by a person brought to the police station during a routine traffic stop suspected of robbery. He found it justified to carry out house search where he found perfectly shined shoes in the suspect's closet.[2] The detective remembered the testimony of a girl previously attacked who mentioned shiny shoes when

---

1   FARKAS Johanna PhD, National University of Public Service, Faculty of Law Enforcement, Institute of Law Enforcement Behavioural Science, Department of Criminalpsychology, senior lecturer,
FARKAS Johanna PhD, Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, Rendészeti Magatartástudományi Intézet, Kriminálpszichológia Tanszék, egyetemi adjunktus
Farkas.Johanna@uni-nke.hu

2   Sᴜʟʟɪᴠᴀɴ, Kevin S.: *The Bundy Murders. A Comprehensive History*, McFarland Company, USA, 2009, 101.

describing the attacker. Thompson's suspicion was further raised. From our point of view, it is interesting because he was seen with growing antipathy by his colleagues at the same time. They didn't agree with him that the nice young man who had graduated in psychology and was studying law at that time could be the evil serial killer. In their opinion, Thompson's persistence cut Bundy's rising career and brought police in an awkward situation. Later when Bundy was arrested and taken to a preliminary hearing, he manipulated the police, won their trust and managed to escape. Two weeks later he attacked five women within one day and killed two of them.

I find this case noteworthy because Jerry Thompson's point symbolizes the fact that it is difficult to withstand resistance against the majority in a high-cohesion organization like a police department. Thompson opposed his mates and breached the unwritten norm of solidarity. Therefore, he suffered daily insults from his colleagues because he advocated his presumed truth.

The following questions might be posed:
– *Why is it so hard to be in minority?*
– *Why do people rather suppress their own opinions to avoid getting out of line?*
– *And why is it important to come to a consensus when making a decision?*

Effective groups in police

Police consists of multiple groups both in terms of structure and functions. On the one hand, investigation groups are set up to solve a case; on the other hand, the departments of police stations run everyday operations. Both organizational units operate as groups and still they have different characteristics. In the current study, I would like to draw the attention to the similarities instead of analysing differences. It applies to both groups that they are part of a system with a hierarchy, the connections between members are defined by superior-subordinate relationships, and members have to collaborate in order to achieve a goal or complete a task. Also, the standard of success/effectiveness is crucial.

The characteristics of successful and effective groups (teams) were defined by Meredith Belbin (2003).[3] Belbin observed that the combination of team member types can be directly linked to the indicator of effectiveness. During his research, he marked the critical points that lead to efficiency or failure of a team. In order to increase the effectiveness of teams, he found that strengthening the following features would be most important, as applied to police:

---

3   Belbin, Meredith: *Team, avagy az együttműködő csoport*, Budapest, Edge 2000 Kft, 2003.

Goals

Clearly defined goals that are clarified to all team members are essential. In case of the police, the slogan "We serve and protect" is relevant in general. It involves a specific goal and serves as a basic criterion for every member.

Two-way communication

Two-way communication among team members shall be ensured to minimize misunderstandings in communication. This applies to giving and receiving orders and carrying out other professional tasks where the communication distortion can be reduced through feedback.

Well-defined roles and tasks

The roles of police leaders and employees are specific as well as the tasks arising from their job roles. Employees shall be empowered to express their views. They have to be assigned with tasks that they are able to complete based on their resources (e.g. abilities, personality, etc.). They shall not be assigned with tasks that they are unable to carry out sufficiently due to their lack of experience.

Flexibility

The nature of the group decision making process shall be flexibly aligned with the task in question. There are several questions that may arise in terms of leadership in police. Depending on the domain, different aspects can be relevant either in time or in quality. They affect the implementation process, too. For example, it is unjustified to apply thorough group decision making methodologies, which require a long time, when there is a short time limit to handle a situation, such as assessing a breach of policy as a part of disciplinary proceedings.

High professional level

In the decision making process, participants strive to make a decision according to their best knowledge and abilities and considering statutory obligations as well as professional and personal interests.

Highly qualified leaders

Police leaders shall have outstanding qualities in every field of power. Thus, they have to perform on a high level in both position power (e.g. legitimate power, punishment, rewarding, power from relationships) and personal power (e.g. individual abilities,

expertise, handling information). These criteria shall be given priority in the selection process of executives.

Open expression of opinions

Police leaders shall establish an atmosphere where employees can express and exchange their opinions openly knowing that they might be contradicted. By doing so, constructive conflicts may become common, displacing destructive conflicts. This leads to a higher level of problem solving.

Strong group cohesion

If a group is highly cohesive and the members are satisfied with the leader, accept and trust him/her, support the leader's decisions and the leader has set well-outlined goals then the group can be expected to collaborate effectively. For example, the well distinguishable armband of the Intervention Police uniform results in strengthening the cohesion.

Efficiency indicators

Employees shall be empowered to be able to assess their own efficiency and present proposals on how to improve their own activities and the operations of their department.

Group decision making: characteristics and methods

A classic issue of social psychologists concerns the ways of manifestation of the social influence process, or, more specifically, the regularities of behaviours in a group. The definite characteristics of a group (e.g. size, composition, structure, etc.), the roles played by the group members in the group as well as the group communication all influence how the group functions, and thus also affect how the group makes decisions. There are a number of techniques for how to make group decision making effective.[4] Below listed are a few methods applicable in police settings:
- The *decision tree* represents potential decision paths in a graphic form. It can map many branches, i.e. many optional solutions.
- The *fishbone diagram* (also called Ishikawa diagram) helps in splitting causes and effects. Using this method, solution options are analysed by separating causes and effects.
- Using the *tree diagram* method we can start from a general formulation and get to specific definitions by adding more and more branches, i.e. more and more options.

---

4 Nagy Zsolt: *Döntéselmélet és módszertan*, Szombathely, Simonyi Károly Kar Műszaki Menedzsment Képzési Központ, 2005.

– In *Pareto analysis* or ABC analysis essential information is separated from inessential information with regard to a problematic situation. Multiple causes can be studied systematically using a bar diagram.
– The *Nominal group technique* is a typical interactive group decision making method used mainly in analysing and solving open problems. Supported by a moderator, team members collect opinions (influencing thoughts) and discuss them. Decision is made through voting. This kind of method seems too time-consuming in police and can only be applied to a small number of tasks.
– *Brainstorming* is probably the most well-known method of revealing new solution options. First, ideas are raised and then they are evaluated and applied as required.
– *635 method* or brainwriting is a variation of brainstorming where the participants of the decision making process work in groups. They share a specific number of solution proposals with each other for several times, thereby making it possible to learn and extend each other's ideas. In police, it is similar to the method of "circulation".

Obstacles in decision making processes

The efficiency of a police leader materially depends on how s/he makes decisions and acts upon them. It is a common difficulty that the intention of a leader cannot be expressed indirectly in their actions. Although the leader is determined and knows the steps of implementation, they are not able to fully achieve the goals set flawlessly. Here is a summary of the pitfalls that might hinder decision making processes, based on MacCrimmon's work (1995).[5]

Defining specific tasks and goals

Police leaders think tasks, goals and vision (it might seem an overstatement of course). First, they clarify their tasks they shall complete and then they try to answer the question how they can do it. Finally, they consider the effects on the future. Smaller goals may follow only after this.

It is a difficulty that usually there are several tasks and goals set so the consideration of possible solutions is more difficult and there is a higher probability of making mistakes. Mental burden, tight deadlines and the work done by professionally incompetent colleagues all hinder the efficiency of leaders.

Detecting barriers

Police leaders have a crucial capacity that is related to considering difficulties, obstacles, problems and potential sources of risks.

---

5 Zoltayné Paprika Zita: *A stratégiai döntéshozatal módszertani kérdései*, PhD dissertation, Budapest, Budapesti Közgazdaságtudományi Egyetem, 1999.

For example, the limited availability of resources (e.g. insufficient amount of police staff on duty), meeting statutory requirements (e.g. policies, regulations, commands), situations jeopardizing human lives, previous unprofessional measures, the lack or unreliability of information, tight deadlines, the lack of competence, or even the frustration due to a task can become barriers. In these cases the leader's most important task is to separate the barriers that can be influenced from those ones that cannot be influenced. They need to focus primarily on barriers that can be influenced and work out alternative solutions that reduce the possibility of making mistakes.

Beliefs

As every human being, police leaders also have a set of beliefs. It is the leader's responsibility to compare beliefs with the facts. During this process, a number of beliefs can be questioned. Based on their previous experience, police leaders use so called scenarios that are applied to a typical situation and best practice solution strategies can be implemented. In this case, "what if…" solutions are formulated on a cognitive level in their representations and determine their narrative thinking, too.

It can raise a potential obstacle that not every option is considered and usually the cases with the highest probability are emphasized that might be misleading. Therefore it is essential to discuss the problem with an outsider as well as collect, organize and evaluate information systematically.

Assessing risks

It can create a potential source of flaws if police leaders overestimate risks of small probability and underestimate risks of high probability during risk assessment. In this aspect, personality traits have a high significance since risk-taking, success-oriented, failure-accepting or failure-avoiding attitudes can influence decisions and the performance motivation of decision makers.[6] Police leaders have to have a sufficient level of self-knowledge and be aware of the limitations stemming from their personalities. To minimize the chance of making mistakes, various methods of risk assessment shall be applied such as SWOT analysis.

Defining problems

The process of working out solution options is directly affected by the definition of the problem in question. If a police leader asks the question incorrectly then they will receive incorrect answers. The leader's responsibility includes approaching the question in an objective way based on facts and raise problems that might be relevant to completing a task in question. Thus, the interpretation of the problem is a relevant factor

---

6   MAYER Krisztina, LUKÁCS Andrea, BARKAI László: *A teljesítménymotiváció megjelenése különböző kockázatkereső magatartásokban*, Egészségtudományi Közlemények, 1(2011)/ 1, 105–111.

that also needs to be emphasized. To eliminate errors, a police leader shall not derogate any task and shall define every task to the employees so that it means a challenge for them.

Establishing and assessing options

In this aspect, resourcefulness, creativity and problem oriented approach is highlighted. Basically, the application of several approaches at the same time results in making the most efficient decision.

In this stage of the decision making process there are two typical sources of error. On the one hand, improvisation is very common. On the other hand, leaders tend to apply obvious and intuitive solutions. Although these solutions simplify any situation and thus speed up the decision making process, they also entail a significant probability of errors. People usually use simplification by applying heuristics (mental shortcuts) (Rossmo, 2009b). Heuristics help to orientate in the world. However, from the aspect of leadership theory, they can lead to failed decisions and serious mistakes in decision making. A few important heuristics from the aspect of decision making are:

- *Anchoring and adjustment:* a leader relies too heavily on the first piece of information and fails to consider other information.
- *Availability heuristic:* people prefer to overemphasize events that are easier to imagine and more likely to occur and therefore fail to consider potential solutions obviously resulting from the facts.
- *Rationalization:* operates an unconscious strategy to eliminate cognitive dissonance that entails a change in attitude.
- *Intellectualization:* it is a mechanism operated to protect self-image when a leader explains a wrong decision based on professional points and underpins it with rational explanations to stress that it was actually a good decision.

Heuristics pose difficulties in investigations, too. "It is not easy to think clearly and rationally", as stated by Canadian criminologist and detective Rossmo who educates police staff.[7] She highlights the role of the unconscious, almost automatically operating psychic processes functioning in decision making during the work of police staff. In her opinion, these mechanisms can create serious pitfalls and therefore it is crucial that police staff are aware of them. These mechanisms can be identified by enhanced self-monitoring (self-reflection).

Emotions, personality and organizational culture

In logical (rational) decision making, emotions can create negative factors since they mislead decision makers from the rational dimension and may significantly influence them. However, in intuitive decision making, they can even help decision makers. Since

---

7   Rossmo, Kim D.: *Failures in Criminal Investigation,* The Police Chief, 76 (2009)/10, 54–62.

police requires rational decisions, the secondary effect of emotions can prevail.[8] For example, in case of a dismissal, the reasons shall be assessed, the relevance of the decisions shall be underpinned by facts and emotional issues shall be handled consciously.

The role of personality traits in decision making is not covered in detail in this study. To name the main areas of this domain: decision making processes are influenced by the attitude of a leader, their motivation and basic characteristics such as temper, socialization background, etc.

Police is a hierarchical organization therefore it is determined by subordinate and superior relationships of members. However, informal structures (e.g. friendships) also play an important role. Both formal and informal settings create an organizational culture where a number of functions are provided to the police staff by the organization: belonging somewhere, strengthening of identity, ensuring personal growth, motivation and creating a positive vision.[9]

Interactions between decisions

Decisions shall be consistent and in line with previous and future decision making situations.

Group think

When Rossmo describes the group think in police organizations, she uses the following metaphor: "Who wants to tell the emperor he has no clothes".[10] Hierarchical organizations often lack feedback, especially negative feedback. In highly cohesive organizations there is a big pressure when making key decisions which involves a number of adverse effects. Potential options cannot be analysed by selecting information or failing to systematically investigate information. According to Rossmo, the phenomenon of group think can lead to a disaster in an investigation and the effects can even extend to decisions made in other police settings.

Steyn and his colleagues (2004) justified Rossmo's opinion scientifically. Based on their research done in South African investigation police staff they have proven that high group cohesion, low respect of people outside the group, low organizational safety and authoritarian (direct) leadership style in the decision making process lead to an increase of the group think phenomenon.[11] This was underpinned by Pollock[12] (2012) and Geller (1997), too.[13]

---

8   Drodge, Edward N., Murphy, Steven A.: *Interrogating Emotions in Police Leadership*, Human Resource Development Review, 1(2002)/ 4, 2002, 420–438.
9   Horváth József: *Gondolatok a Rendőrség szervezeti kultúrájáról*, Periodika. Pécsi Határőr Tudományos Közlemények, 10(2009), 22–31.
10 Rossmo, Kim D.: *op. cit.*
11 Steyn, J., De Vries, I., Meyer, M.: *Groupthink in the South African Police Service: an experimental analysis,* Acta Criminologica, 17(2004)/ 2. 1–16.
12 Pollock, Joycelyn M.: *Crime and Justice in America: An Introduction to Criminal Justice*, USA, Anderson Elsevier, 2012.
13 Geller, William A.: *Suppose we were really serious about police departments becoming "Learning Organizations"?* National Institute of Justice Journal, 1(1997)/2–7.

According the observations of social psychologists, a consensus can most easily be derailed when people with similar thinking have to make a decision under high pressure.[14] This circumstance results in the fact that the road to agreement is eliminated in order and replaced by consent. Time limit and responsibility pose stress and criticism expressed by the minority is avoided. This leads to serious consequences. An apparent consensus is reached but the decision (consensus) entails significant risks. There is high tension in the police when a case is required to be resolved as soon as possible. The significance of coming to a consensus is overrated and becomes more important than the way it is reached (e.g. bank robbery in Mór). A leader has an effect on employees, the majority has an effect on the minority and it can lead to fatal losses if the majority fails to consider the views of the minority.

The definition of group think was described by Janis (1972). He described the cases of coming to a consensus where there is a strong cohesion in the group and group members strive to have identical views so strongly that the reliability of a consensus is questioned.[15] There are three subprocesses that affect a consensus.

Neglecting information

Coming to a consensus is so important and the pressure towards an agreement is so high that group members neglect conflicting information. The members who doubt themselves censor their own opinions and also fail to share their criticism or even fail to become aware of their doubts. Some members may function as "thought police", which means that they "protect" the group from any information jeopardizing the consensus. Under these settings, a process of collective rationalization starts. Members try to prove that the decision is correct and underpin it with explanations.

Social influence

Social influence occurs when one's thoughts, emotions or behaviours are affected by one or more person(s) – even in their absence. Therefore police leaders can not only directly influence their employees' opinions and views but also without them being aware of it. Employees want to live up to the expectations and may represent the leader's point of view consciously or unconsciously. Depending on the employee's personality, of course, the opposite case can also occur.

Public compliance

In case of group think, the stress caused by striving to come to a consensus, there is low tolerance toward the disagreeing attitude of any group member. Members try to

---

14 Rathus, Spencer A.: *Psychology: Concepts and Connections*. USA, Wadsworth, 2013.
15 Bazerman, Max H., Giuliano, T.: *Escalation of Commitment in Individual and Group Decision Making,* Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 33(1984), 141–152.

convince the disagreeing member(s) to follow the "right path" with various arguments. Actually, it is all about the majority putting pressure on individuals, thereby causing the doubting individual to review their point of view. Usually a consensus is only illusionary due to this phenomenon because not every group member agrees with it. In this case, a group considers itself invulnerable and infallible though they have neglected significant information. As a result of social contagion, there are serious distortions in the decision making process, too.

How to prevent group think

Janis (1982) not only described the phenomenon of group think in detail but also made a few proposals how highly cohesive groups can avoid group think even under high pressure, in spite of structural difficulties and in provocative situations.[16]

Democratic atmosphere

To help any and all options be shared, an atmosphere of trust shall be established, where open questions and objections are encouraged. In such an environment there is a higher chance that the weaknesses of different points of view will be discussed.

Assessing alternatives

It is recommended to include members in a group who share critical points of view, playing the role of the "Devil's Advocate." They help by doubting the group's decision calling attention to the deficiencies in the line of thought and pointing out anomalies in the conclusions.

Involving outsiders

It is expedient to involve external professionals in the decision making process to prevent social influence.

Establishing task forces

Any team can be divided to smaller task forces or subgroups. Task forces shall view a certain problem from different aspects, based on different considerations. Subgroups can work out several alternatives which also enrich the problem solving process.

---

16 ESSER, James K.: *Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research*, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 73(1998)/2–3. 116–141.

Minimizing the role of the leader

If the leader shares their views prior to the group decision is made then it can influence members. It is beneficial for the leader to wait until every group member has shared their opinion.

Creating a constructive conflict situation

In such an environment, critiques and doubts are encouraged and it is accepted to share pros and cons as well as detailed proposals.

The phenomenon of group think exists and it is important to know its social psychological factors to prevent its adverse effect on the efficiency of police management. In my study I intended to point out that, beside applying thorough leadership and organizational theory, psychological processes typical to groups shall also be considered to help police leaders do an effective job.

RESOURCES

Bazerman, Max H., Giuliano, T.: *Escalation of Commitment in Individual and Group Decision Making,* Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 33(1984), 141–152.

Belbin, Meredith: *Team, avagy az együttműködő csoport*, Budapest, Edge 2000 Kft, 2003.

Drodge, Edward N., Murphy, Steven A.: *Interrogating Emotions in Police Leadership*, Human Resource Development Review, 1(2002)/ 4, 2002, 420–438.

Esser, James K.: *Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research*, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 73(1998)/2-3. 116–141.

Geller, William A.: *Suppose we were really serious about police departments becoming "Learning Organizations"?* National Institute of Justice Journal, 1(1997)/2–7.

Horváth József: *Gondolatok a Rendőrség szervezeti kultúrájáról*, Periodika. Pécsi Határőr Tudományos Közlemények, 10(2009), 22-31.

Mayer Krisztina, Lukács Andrea, Barkai László: *A teljesítménymotiváció megjelenése különböző kockázatkereső magatartásokban*, Egészségtudományi Közlemények, 1(2011)/ 1, 105–111.

Nagy Zsolt: *Döntéselmélet és módszertan*, Szombathely, Simonyi Károly Kar Műszaki Menedzsment Képzési Központ, 2005.

Pollock, Joycelyn M.: *Crime and Justice in America: An Introduction to Criminal Justice*, USA, Anderson Elsevier, 2012.

Rathus, Spencer A.: *Psychology: Concepts and Connections.* USA, Wadsworth, 2013.

Rossmo, Kim D.: *Failures in Criminal Investigation,* The Police Chief, 76 (2009)/10, 54–62.

Rossmo, Kim D.: *Criminal Investigative Failures*, FL, Taylor & Francis, 2009.

Smith, Eliot R., Mackie, Diane M.: *Szociálpszichológia*, Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2004.

Steyn, J., De Vries, I., Meyer, M.: *Groupthink in the South African Police Service: an experimental analysis,* Acta Criminologica, 17(2004)/ 2. 1–16.

Sullivan, Kevin S.: *The Bundy Murders. A Comprehensive History*, McFarland Company, USA, 2009.

Zoltayné Paprika Zita: *A csoportos döntéshozatal = Döntéselmélet,* ed. Zoltayné Paprika Zita, Budapest, Alinea Kiadó, 2002.

Zoltayné Paprika Zita: *A stratégiai döntéshozatal módszertani kérdései*, PhD dissertation, Budapest, Budapesti Közgazdaságtudományi Egyetem, 1999.

ABSZTRAKT

A csoportos döntéshozatal árnyoldalai pszichológiai szempontból: a csoportgondolkodás buktatói és azok kezelési módjai

FARKAS Johanna

A rendvédelem területén összehangolt munkavégzésre van szükség a szakmai hatékonyság érdekében, ezért fontos ismerni azokat a szociálpszichológiai történéseket, melyek a csoportos döntéshozatal buktatói lehetnek. Főként nagy kohézióval rendelkező csoportokban, és rendkívüli jelentőségű ügyek során jelenhet meg a csoportgondolkodás. Ekkor az egyén saját véleményével szemben túlértékeli a csoport által elfogadott álláspontot annak érdekében, hogy konszenzusos döntés szülessen. A döntéshozó team ebben az esetben döntését sérthetetlennek értékeli, így a kritikai aspektusok kinyilatkoztatásának nem is ad teret. Szélsőséges esetben ezen mechanizmus végzetes döntési hibákat eredményezhet. A csoportgondolkodás mechanizmusainak ismeretében azonban ki lehet védeni az esetleges hibákat, és bizonyos technikák segítségével kezelni is.

Kulcsszavak: *rendőri vezetés, csoportdöntés, csoportgondolkodás*