

A Social Identity Maintenance Model of Groupthink

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We present a social identity maintenance model of groupthink that (a) defines groupthink as a collective attempt to maintain a positive image of the group, (b) identifies conditions under which this form of concurrence seeking is likely to occur, (c) parsimoniously explains the equivocal empirical findings on groupthink, and (d) specifies intervention tactics that can mitigate the detrimental consequences of groupthink for group decision outcomes. © 1998 Academic Press

In the early 1950s in Minnesota, Marian Keech claimed to be receiving messages from outer space. One evening in September, she received a message from the planet Clarion informing her that on December 21 of that year, the world would be destroyed by a great flood. The message went on to say that flying saucers would come from Clarion to rescue her and those close to her.

Mrs. Keech, a strong and charismatic middle-aged women (directive leadership) attracted a group of about 25 followers. This group thought of themselves as called together for a special purpose—seekers of an alternative wisdom and followers of orders from the Guardians or higher beings from outer space

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(high cohesion centered on a social identity). Interestingly, there was much interpersonal discord in the group. After predicting the end of the world, members withdrew from the world, rarely interacted with those outside the group (insulation from others). They claimed that those outside the group could not understand the true nature of spirituality (stereotype of others). The group made a number of sacrifices to follow their beliefs—they quit their jobs, gave away money, houses, and possessions, and cut out all metal and zippers from their clothing because such material would obviously cause burns in humans once they boarded the space ship. Only a select few were allowed to join the group; those who did not evince a sincere interest were turned away; those who felt doubts either suppressed them (self-censorship) or were counseled by others (pressure on dissenters, mindguarding). Among those who joined the group were three psychologists, Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter who observed and recorded the group's actions (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Festinger, 1987).

Of course, the world did not end on December 21 and the group found itself under enormous pressure (high threat) to explain why the world had not been decimated in a flood of biblical proportions. About five hours after the world did not end, Mrs. Keech announced that she had just received another message from Clarion: there would be no need for the flying saucers to descend; the world had been saved because of the unflagging faith of this small group of believers (inherent morality of the group). Sitting all night long, the group had spread so much light that the "God of Earth" had decided to save the world from destruction (illusion of invulnerability).

All of the group members appeared to accept (illusion of unanimity) this new prophecy (a collective rationalization)—after all, they had little hope of finding a better solution as to why they had just abandoned their possessions. They were so happy to receive this information that they did not question its wisdom (limited search and appraisal, poor information search), nor did they consider that something else may be occurring such as the unlikely existence of Clarion (selective information processing, incomplete survey of alternatives, failure to examine rejected alternatives), nor did they consider that belief in this new prophecy would make them appear as fools (failure to examine risks) or what they would do about it (failure to develop contingency plans). Instead, they began calling the media and their friends informing them of the prophecy and how they had prevented the destruction of Earth (a poor quality decision).

The story of Mrs. Keech and her failed prophecy has its parallels in historical and modern events—the predictions of the end of the world and salvation for believers by such groups as the Millerites, Branch Davidians, Aum Supreme Truth, and most recently Heaven's Gate. Festinger (1957) used the example to illustrate his theory of cognitive dissonance; Mrs Keech's attempt to proselytize others was seen by Festinger as an attempt to win support from others for a collective rationalization. As our description of Mrs. Keech and her group indicates, all of the antecedents, consequences, and symptoms of groupthink (listed in the parenthetical expressions) posited by Janis (1972, 1982) were present in this group. Although, to our knowledge, it has never been categorized

as an example of groupthink, Mrs. Keech's group epitomized the essence of groupthink as "extreme concurrence sought by decision-making groups." Did Mrs. Keech and her band of believers engage in groupthink? This question strikes at the very heart of the question of "What is groupthink?" In this article, we attempt to answer these questions by developing a model of groupthink as social identity maintenance.

THE ELUSIVENESS OF GROUPTHINK

Groupthink is an elusive concept. Clearly, one of the main difficulties in conducting empirical and theoretical work on groupthink is the ambiguity surrounding the definition of groupthink. The groupthink concept has been used to explain an extraordinarily wide array of group decisions (see Turner, Pratkanis, Probasco, & Leve, 1992 for a selective list). The concept itself has taken on a variety of meanings and connotations. In fact, several conceptualizations of groupthink recently have been developed. For example, 't Hart (1990) defines groupthink as both collective avoidance and collective optimism. Other researchers have underscored the unique role of conformity (McCauley, 1989), political concerns (Kramer, 1998), and collective efficacy (Whyte, 1998). There are at least two interpretations of this proliferation of representations of groupthink. One perspective suggests that the concept is so ambiguous that it could encompass any aspect of group decision making and is therefore of limited explanatory or predictive utility.

However, another perspective, and one that we subscribe to with our social identity maintenance (SIM) approach, suggests that groupthink can be a useful concept *if* the specific conceptualization accounts for the unique situational components inherent in it. In short, this perspective suggests that multiple routes to groupthink are possible. However, specification of the particular facets of groupthink and the configuration and definition of the antecedent conditions are essential before the concept can be worthwhile.

REFINING THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF GROUPTHINK: A SOCIAL IDENTITY MAINTENANCE (SIM) PERSPECTIVE

The social identity maintenance perspective underscores the prominence of the group's social construction of its internal processes and external circumstances. According to this approach, group members actively attempt to maintain and even enhance their evaluations of the group and its actions. Groupthink then becomes a process of concurrence-seeking that is directed at maintaining a shared positive view of the functioning of the group. In other words, the group attempts to protect its collective identity, especially under conditions of threat.

The SIM perspective both converges with and diverges from traditional conceptualizations of groupthink. It shares with these models the notion that groupthink is fundamentally a process by which group members seek to secure

concurrence and, by virtue of that, mutual acceptance as bonafide group participants. Yet, it differs from these models in crucial ways. Most importantly, it suggests that this process is undertaken to maintain and reinforce the positive image of the group. Further, it proposes that groupthink will occur under identifiable, specific conditions and provides some preliminary insights into the process by which those antecedent conditions produce both groupthink and its consequences. In the next section, we examine the particular nature of these antecedent conditions. We then discuss the process by which these conditions lead to the consequences of groupthink.

CONDITIONS CONDUCTIVE TO GROUPTHINK AS SOCIAL IDENTITY MAINTENANCE: THE PROMINENCE OF COHESION AND COLLECTIVE THREAT

The SIM model proposes that groupthink occurs when members attempt to maintain a shared positive image of the group. Two assumptions underlie this notion. Most simplistically, group members must develop a positive image of the group. Second, that image must be questioned by a collective threat. These two conditions, then, are essential for the development of groupthink *as social identity maintenance*. Yet, how do these conditions arise? More importantly, what specific components of each antecedent condition are essential?

The model suggests that two antecedents of groupthink are especially critical in producing groupthink as social identity maintenance. The first, cohesion that incorporates a social identity perspective, contributes to the development of a shared positive image of the group. The second, a collective threat, is the catalyst for the intragroup processes that promote the concurrence seeking and defective decision making that are the hallmarks of the groupthink phenomenon. However, these two antecedents differ on several important dimensions from the traditional definitions used by the groupthink model. Moreover, the SIM model predicts that they will have specific effects on particular groupthink consequences and on the defective decision making that is the hallmark of the phenomenon. In the following sections, we first discuss the particular components of both cohesion as social identity and collective threat and then examine the consequences of each.

Developing a Shared Positive Image of the Group: The Role of Self-Categorization and Social Identity

Developing a positive image. How do groups develop a positive image? One route involves the interplay of self-categorization processes and social identity maintenance. According to this perspective (J. C. Turner, 1981; J. C. Turner & Haslam, in press), group members must categorize themselves as a group (e.g., Kennedy men, Nixon White House, followers of the Guardian's Orders) rather than, say, as a set of unique individuals. In other words, members must perceive the group as indeed having a social identity. The SIM model suggests that groups who do not meet this precondition will be unlikely to develop groupthink

as social identity maintenance. In short, simply drawing together a group of individuals (despite their level of mutual attraction) will be insufficient to produce this form of groupthink. Note that the SIM perspective diverges from some traditional approaches which define cohesion in terms of mutual attraction (e.g., Lott & Lott, 1968) but is consistent with the notion of cohesion as pressure to maintain the group (Cartwright & Zander, 1953). Nevertheless, this categorization in turn has crucial implications for the development of groupthink.

The consequences of categorization. Categorization has three consequences for groupthink. When categorization occurs, the group tends to develop positive views of the group (J. C. Turner, 1981). Categorization leads groups to seek positive distinctiveness for the in-group and to exhibit a motivational bias for positive collective self-esteem (J. C. Turner, 1981). Thus, we see that members tend to develop a positive image of the group and, importantly, are motivated to protect that image.

Categorization has a second function within the groupthink framework. It also serves as the basis on which cohesion operates. A self-categorization and social identity perspective suggests that the perception of others as group members rather than as unique, different persons may be a necessary precondition for group cohesion (Tajfel, 1981; J. C. Turner *et al.*, 1987). Categorization may also operate by reinforcing the similarities between the individual and other group members and making the group identity (as opposed to the group members) attractive.

Finally, categorization serves a third critical purpose within the social identity maintenance model of groupthink. It provides the basis upon which the collective threat operates.

Collective Threat: Questioning the Group's Image

A shared threat. A second condition highlighted by a SIM perspective is that the group should experience a collective threat that attacks its positive image. We define threat as a potential loss to the group (cf. Argote, Turner, & Fichman, 1989). It is critical that the threat be collective in nature. A threat to an individual member of the group is not likely to engender the groupthink-like consequences that a collective threat will. For example, a threat to a single member may result in the dismissal of that member in order to maintain the group's image. For social identity maintenance pressures to operate, this collective threat should also question or attack the positive image of the group. With respect to the development of groupthink-like consequences, this type of threat has some critical consequences for group processes.

The consequences of collective threat. When threatened, individuals and groups tend to narrow their focus of attention to threat-related cues (Kahneman, 1973; Turner, 1992). In instances where the collective identity is threatened, the group tends to focus on those cues that can help maintain the shared positive image of the group that is invoked by social categorization. Thus, the

overriding task of the group becomes image protection or even enhancement. Under certain circumstances, this can have detrimental consequences for group functioning. This is especially the case when high cohesion coupled with a social identity exacerbates identity protection motivations. We discuss this situation in the following section.

When the Collective Identity Is Threatened: The Independent and Interactive Effects of Cohesion and Threat on Decision Effectiveness and Groupthink Symptoms

The SIM model takes a particularistic approach to groupthink. One factor contributing to the ambiguity of the traditional conceptualization is that the process by which antecedents affect outcomes has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Turner *et al.* (1992) identify three assumptions that have apparently guided empirical and theoretical development of the groupthink model. The *strict* interpretation suggests that all antecedents must be present in a given situation in order for groupthink to occur. The *additive* interpretation suggests that groupthink effects should be increasingly pronounced as more antecedents are present. As appealing as these interpretations may be, they have not been supported by any research. Thus, a third perspective, the liberal or *particularistic* approach, in which specific forms of particular antecedents are associated with specific outcomes seems more fruitful.

Consequences for decision effectiveness. The SIM model holds that threat and cohesion should interactively affect group decision effectiveness. Recall that categorization and the induction of a social identity motivate the group to protect its view of itself as an effective well-functioning body. Under non-threatening circumstances, this cohesion can in fact have facilitatory effects on group decisions. When group goals favor effectiveness and productivity, cohesion enhances the accomplishment of those goals. In short, cohesive groups tend to be better at achieving their goals (see Turner *et al.* (1992) for a brief review of this literature, see Shaw (1981) for an extensive treatment).

A collective threat, however, can fundamentally change those goals. This form of threat strongly questions the group identity. When the group is highly cohesive around that identity, it is also highly motivated to protect that identity. Thus, a threat to that identity can have dramatic effects on intragroup processes. Unchecked, this type of threat is likely to induce the group to focus on threat-relevant activities and goals. In this case, the goal of the group is transformed from the pursuit of effective functioning to the maintenance, protection, and even enhancement of the threatened image. Not surprisingly, when the task is complex and uncertain (as in most groupthink decisions), this focusing of attention detracts from the decision-making process to such an extent that performance is impaired.

Consequences for groupthink symptoms. The SIM model suggests that group members will have an overriding need to engage in identity protection. Thus, group members' reports of their decision making processes are likely to

reflect that motivation. We would expect then that evaluations are likely to exhibit defensive strategies designed to protect or even enhance the image of the group. However, how will the two prominent conditions affect these evaluations?

Again, the SIM model takes a particularistic approach and suggests that the specific form of the antecedent will affect its consequences. In fact, group members may employ a variety of tactics to protect the group image. For example, Lanzetta (1955) found that groups tend to exhibit more variety in their intragroup processes under threatening conditions than under nonthreatening conditions. Thus, groups can exhibit a variety of groupthink processes and indicators as members attempt to maintain a positive image of the group in the face of a threatening situation that already induces variability into the group process. These symptoms should be manifested as attempts to put forth the most positive image of the group. For example, Hardyck and Braden (1962) observed members of a Pentecostal sect in which the leader predicted the end of the world by nuclear attack within 6 months. Much like Mrs. Keech's group, members packed up their belongings and moved to a remote site in the southwestern United States. When the attack did not come, they also developed a rationalization for their behavior which was different from the one developed by Mrs. Keech: (a) they really did not predict the exact date of the end of the world, (b) God was using them to warn the rest of the world of impending doom, and (c) the exercise was a test of faith.

Indeed, there are interesting parallels between the symptoms of groupthink and the tactics of social identity maintenance or enhancement. For example the groupthink symptom of stereotyping of outgroups resembles the outgroup discrimination that can accompany the induction of social identities. Similarly, illusion of invulnerability and rationalization are similar to social identity maintenance strategies involving the selective enhancement of various group characteristics to achieve positive distinctiveness. Finally, pressures toward uniformity and self-censorship induced by groupthink are similar to referent informational influence processes (J. C. Turner, 1982). This partial list illustrates the variety of tactics that are readily available to groups as they attempt to protect their identities. When faced with the complexity of the decision situation and the variability induced by threat, groups have a wide array of options with which to bolster their image. This also lends support to the particularistic or liberal interpretation of groupthink which suggests that unique conceptualizations of antecedents may be associated with specific configurations of outcomes.

Let us examine more specifically some consequences of cohesion and threat. Prior research has suggested that cohesion may be associated with more risky decisions (Thompson & Carsrud, 1976) and greater social influence, agreement, and conformity (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). However, cohesion may also, depending on the nature of the group norms, result in more discussion of ideas (e.g., Leana, 1985). A collective threat can likewise have a variety of consequences for group processes. Prior research has demonstrated that threat can increase rationalization about the group decision (Janis & Mann, 1977),

produce denial (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), exacerbate premature closure (Janis, 1982; Janis & Mann, 1977), and limit participation in group processes (Hall & Mansfield, 1971; for a review of this literature see Turner & Horvitz, in press). Thus, again, the specific components of the group situation are paramount in predicting the effects of the antecedent conditions.

EVIDENCE FOR GROUPTHINK AS SOCIAL IDENTITY MAINTENANCE: A REAPPRAISAL OF EXISTING RESEARCH

As evidence for the groupthink process, Janis (1972, 1982) presented a detailed qualitative analysis of defective decision making by groups in the cases of the appeasement of Nazi Germany, Pearl Harbor, Bay of Pigs, North Korean invasion, and escalation of the Vietnam War and compared them to the successful group decisions in the cases of the Marshall Plan and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Tetlock (1979) conducted a more formal test by performing a content analysis of archival records of public statements made by key decision makers involved in the decisions identified by Janis. Results of this analysis suggested that decision makers in the groupthink situations possessed more simplistic perceptions of policy issues and made more positive references to the United States and its allies but did not engage in more outgroup stereotyping (see Tetlock, Peterson, McGuire, Chang, & Feld, 1992 for additional analyses).

Despite this early evidence and the appearance of the groupthink phenomena in many textbooks, the concept of groupthink is not without its critics. These criticisms include (a) poor specifications of critical constructs in the groupthink process, (b) poor specification of links between antecedent and consequences, and (c) ambiguous delineations of the conditions under which groupthink should occur (cf. Longley & Pruitt, 1980; Steiner, 1982). In addition, research investigating groupthink has identified a number of empirical problems for traditional interpretations of groupthink (see M. E. Turner *et al.*, 1992; for additional views see Aldag & Fuller, 1993; Moorhead, 1982; Park, 1990; 't Hart, 1990). These empirical problems have centered on the issues of (a) inadequacy of cohesion to predict groupthink results, (b) failures to manipulate threat without collective consequences, (c) failure to find experimental evidence for poor decision making, (d) failures to support strict and additive models, and (e) failure to find the full constellation of groupthink effects. In the following sections, we look at each of these empirical problems and note their implications for a SIM of groupthink. Then, we reexamine case and experimental evidence to provide support for the SIM model of groupthink.

The inadequacy of cohesion conceptualized solely as mutual attraction. Although Janis's original and some new case analyses (e.g., Hensely & Griffin, 1986) provided evidence for the groupthink process, several lines of research raise questions about Janis's original specification of group cohesion as mutual attraction of group members (Lott & Lott, 1965) or as the desire to obtain rewards from membership in a prestigious group. First, experimental research has largely demonstrated the futility of manipulating cohesion as

mutual attraction (see Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway, Marriott, & Esser, 1985; Flowers, 1977; Fodor & Smith, 1982; Leana, 1985). Second, Raven's (1974) analysis of the Nixon White House handling of the Watergate break-in suggested that cohesion in this instance depended not so much on the presence of an *esprit de corps* but rather the desire to maintain group membership at all costs. Third, other researchers (e.g., Esser & Lindoerfer, 1989) have pointed out that the NASA Challenger launch team was a cohesive group in the sense that they developed a shared identity as members of an elite NASA core and, like the Nixon White House members, wanted to remain part of that group (Feynman (1988); see Moorhead, Ference, & Neck (1991) for another analysis; see Turner & Pratkanis (1997), for a similar analysis of the NASA Hubble group). These analyses suggest a different perspective on group cohesion — one that defines cohesion in terms of self-categorization or social identity (Tajfel, 1981; J. C. Turner *et al.*, 1987). The policy making groups originally studied by Janis appear to conform to this precondition. Moreover, many subsequent case studies providing evidence for the predicted effects of cohesion also meet this condition (see especially, for example, Hensley & Griffin, 1986; Neck & Moorhead; 1992).

The inadequacy of threat without collective consequences. Although many case analyses document the influence of threat, few laboratory studies find such effects. How can these contradictory findings be reconciled? One possibility lies in the nature of the threats occurring in the various groupthink situations. In each case analysis, the decision making group faced a threatening situation for which effective means of resolution were not immediately apparent (see Janis, 1982 for a discussion of the importance of this antecedent). In other words, the threats strongly questioned the effective functioning of the groups and presented situations involving collective consequences for the groups. In contrast, the threats used in many experimental studies, while having both face and ecological validity, actually seemed to involve few personal consequences for the group and frequently were imposed through some internal requirement of the decision-making task (e.g., the group had to solve a hypothetical budget crisis in an organizational scenario as opposed to actually facing their own budget cut or other loss with consequences for the group). Clearly, when these types of threats are used, they do not have the effects on intragroup processes specified by the SIM model.

The inadequacy of experimental evidence for impaired decision quality. Each case study of groupthink naturally involves highly defective decision making. Because these cases are selected because they involve poor decisions, this evidence cannot be used to support the groupthink model's predictions regarding group effectiveness. However, experimental evidence can be examined for this purpose. Unfortunately, experimental studies have failed to document the end result and the hallmark of groupthink: the low quality, defective decisions. For example, studies investigating the effects of cohesion and leadership style show no adverse effects on performance (Flowers, 1977; Fodor & Smith, 1982;

Leana, 1985). Studies investigating the effects of social cohesion and discussion procedures (e.g., restricted vs participatory discussion) similarly provide no evidence of impaired decision performance under groupthink conditions (Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway *et al.*, 1985; Courtwright, 1978). Although this line of research can be criticized for using experimental tasks with restricted range on the critical dependent variable, an examination of the operationalization of the antecedents in experimental research suggests that the failure to incorporate social identity aspects of cohesion and collective threats may explain this failure. Recall that the collective threat focuses group efforts on maintaining the group's image rather than on making high quality decisions. This in turn impairs decision effectiveness. Without these preconditions, it is possible that decision making will not be adversely affected.

The inadequacy of evidence for causal relations among model components. Questionable support has been provided for the causal sequences associated with the original model. No research has supported the hypothesized links among the five antecedents, the seven groupthink symptoms, and the eight defective decision making symptoms. As we noted earlier, no published studies provide evidence for either the strict or the additive interpretation of groupthink. Thus, the third interpretation, the particularistic, is more consistent with current evidence. This perspective suggests that groupthink outcomes will depend on the unique situational properties invoked by the particular set of antecedent conditions found in each groupthink situation. For example, procedures designed to limit group discussion (e.g., directive leadership, instructions emphasizing avoiding disagreement) tend to produce fewer solutions, less sharing of information, and fewer statements of disagreement (although they do not adversely affect solution quality measures; e.g., see Flowers, 1977; Leana, 1985). Other antecedents may result in other groupthink effects.

The pliability of groupthink symptoms. The failure to produce the full constellation of groupthink effects in both case and experimental research suggests that groups may employ a variety of techniques to protect their identities. Clearly, groups can creatively manipulate their perceptions so that these identity protection pressures are resolved. Moreover, these evaluations are not likely to be trustworthy indicators of the group processes. Indeed, many studies demonstrate the futility of attempting to examine self-evaluations as anything other than social constructions of the group. What is even more interesting is the failure of many investigations to document the usefulness of more "objective" measures. Again, we interpret this as a need to develop more fine-grained analyses of the relationships between antecedents and consequences.

Although these post hoc analyses are suggestive, they do not directly test the SIM interpretation or develop more fine-grained analyses of the causal relations between antecedents and consequences. The following section examines research specifically testing the SIM model.

EVIDENCE FOR GROUPTHINK AS SOCIAL IDENTITY MAINTENANCE: EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

Experimental research on the SIM model has provided reasonable support for its predictions. Most crucially, this research has documented in the laboratory, for the first time, the impaired decision making that is the ultimate consequence of groupthink. This research has also demonstrated the prominence of cohesion as social identity and of collective threat that incorporates group consequences. Finally, this work shows that groups do construct their self-evaluations so that they indeed project a positive image. The following sections detail research that specifically examines the effects of cohesion and threat on decision making and groupthink indicators.

The first experiment conducted by M. E. Turner *et al.* (1992) examined the effects of cohesion and threat on decision making effectiveness and symptoms of groupthink of three-person groups of college students. Each high cohesion group received a unique group identity (e.g., Eagles) and spent 5 five min discussing and listing the similarities among the group members. Low cohesion groups were not given group identities and spent 5 min discussing their dissimilarities. Thus, this operationalization of cohesion incorporated the requirement that members perceive of themselves as a group. The identity also provided the basis upon which social cohesion can operate.

The threat manipulation conformed to the requirements of the SIM model by incorporating collective personal consequences and challenging the positive image of the group. High threat groups were informed that videotapes of their discussion would be used for training purposes in both classes held on campus and training sessions held in local corporations if the group engaged in dysfunctional decision making processes. Low threat groups were told that the project was in its first stages and that the materials were being pretested. All groups worked on the Parasol Subassembly Task (Maier, 1952). This task describes the production problems (centered on an aging worker) experienced by an automobile assembly team. Solution quality is coded on a 7-point coding scheme (Maier, 1952). This task is especially useful for examining groupthink processes for two reasons. First, it has a wider range on solution quality than many decision tasks used in groupthink research. Second, group process tends to mirror group solution quality such that groups who fully discuss the case and examine alternatives receive higher scores, whereas groups who experience premature closure and limit their case discussion receive poorer scores. After reading, discussing, and formulating a group solution for the task, subjects then individually responded to a postexperimental survey containing self-reports of groupthink and defective decision making symptoms.

The results of this study showed the first experimental evidence for the defective decision making theoretically associated with groupthink. Group decision effectiveness was *interactively* affected by cohesion and threat. Group solution quality was poorer in the high threat, high cohesion (the groupthink treatment) and the low threat, low cohesion treatments than in the high threat, low cohesion and the low threat, high cohesion treatments.

Cohesion and threat *independently* affected symptoms of groupthink and defective decision making. Cohesion increased confidence in the group solution but decreased self-censorship and evaluation of solution risk. Threat increased rationalization, agreement with the decision, and reappraisal of alternatives but reduced self-reported pressure on dissenters. Other defective decision making symptoms involving information processing activities (such as the number of solution objectives considered and so forth) were unaffected by cohesion or threat. This pattern of evidence is inconsistent with strict and with additive interpretations of groupthink but is consistent with the particularistic interpretation.

Moreover, these findings provide evidence for a SIM view of groupthink. Group decision effectiveness was significantly poorer under the simultaneous presence of cohesion and threat. Yet, cohesion and threat appear to induce groups to evaluate themselves more favorably on various dimensions than do low cohesion or low threat. These results reinforce the view that, as Janis (1982) suggests, one outcome of groupthink seems to be a mutual effort among members of the group to maintain emotional equanimity. In other words, groupthink can be viewed as a SIM strategy: a collective effort designed to protect the positive image of the group.

Although this study is suggestive, it is still open to alternative explanations for the findings. However, if the SIM perspective is correct, it provides further insight into specifying the conditions under which the form of groupthink can be produced and into developing a richer understanding of the underlying processes occurring. M. E. Turner *et al.* (1992, Experiment 3) conducted further research that provides evidence supporting this claim. This experiment provided additional support that groups do indeed engage in protection from a threat to the group image.

To design this study, we drew on research that suggests that when faced with a threat to self-esteem, people are likely to self-handicap—that is, they seek to protect against potential failure by actively setting up circumstances or by claiming certain attributes or characteristics (such as reduced effort or alcohol or drug consumption) that may be blamed for poor performance (Frankel & M. L. Snyder, 1978; Higgins, 1990; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Miller, 1976; Snyder, 1990; Snyder, Smoller, Strenta, & Frankel, 1981). Although this results in poor performance on the task, failure on the task does not reflect poorly on self-esteem because it can be attributed to a volitional self-handicapping.

However, research also demonstrates that providing threatened individuals with another potential explanation for the expected failure (such as poor lighting) may obviate the need to use self-handicapping strategies for maintaining self-esteem and subsequently may ameliorate performance decrements (Snyder *et al.*, 1981). Similar predictions can be made concerning the performance of highly cohesive, threatened groups who are given an alternative excuse for their performance.

Assuming that threatened groups strive to protect against a negative image of the group suggests that providing them with an excuse for possible poor performance should reduce the need to justify performance: potential poor

performance can be blamed on the distraction. To test these ideas, we gave three-person groups the high cohesion manipulation described previously and asked them to work on the same parasol assembly discussion task. One-third of the groups were given the identical low threat manipulation described above. One-third received the high threat manipulation similar to that described above (with additional modifications to control for potential identifiability concerns). Finally, one-third of the groups received this threat manipulation and were provided with a potential excuse for possible poor performance. They were told that background music they heard was potentially distracting.

The results dramatically confirmed the predictions of the SIM model. Groups facing groupthink conditions (i.e., high cohesion and high threat) but given an excuse for potential poor performance performed at the same high quality level as groups not facing groupthink conditions. And, once again, groups facing groupthink conditions alone (with no excuse) produced the poorest quality decisions. Consistent with the particularistic interpretation of the model, symptoms of groupthink were again independently affected by threat (cohesion was not independently manipulated). Thus, the reduction of identity protection pressures seems to allow groups to mitigate groupthink tendencies and to produce higher quality decisions.

Thus, we see that both case and experimental evidence exists for the SIM perspective on groupthink. This perspective accomplishes two important objectives: It has (1) parsimoniously accounted for the relevant empirical research and (2) provided the first experimental evidence for the defective decision performance that heretofore was only hypothetically associated with groupthink. This view of groupthink also can be used to suggest specific strategies for preventing groupthink. We discuss these issues in the next section.

DESIGNING INTERVENTIONS

The SIM model is consistent with the view that, as Janis (1982) suggests, one outcome of groupthink seems to be a mutual effort among members of the group to maintain emotional equanimity. In other words, groupthink can be viewed as a SIM strategy: a collective effort designed to protect the positive image of the group. Any interventions designed to prevent groupthink must be formulated with an understanding of this motivation for identity protection.

Such a view of groupthink has two specific implications for preventing groupthink: First, some traditional recommendations advanced by Janis may actually exacerbate the groupthink process when SIM pressures exist. Second, procedures designed to reduce the emotional consequences of protecting a social identity and to stimulate intellectual conflict may be effective in warding off groupthink. Let us first examine, from the standpoint of the SIM model, some potential unintended consequences of traditional recommendations for overcoming groupthink.

The Inadequacy of Some Traditional Recommendations for Preventing Groupthink as SIM

The SIM perspective suggests that some traditional recommendations advanced to overcome groupthink may actually exacerbate the groupthink process when SIM pressures exist. Indeed, unless carefully formulated and executed, these procedures may provoke rather than minimize excessive concurrence-seeking. A brief examination of the traditional recommendations for mitigating groupthink (see Janis, 1982, 1989) are illustrative. Strategies such as the use of outside experts, second chance meetings, subgroup evaluations of alternatives, devil's advocates, and so forth can easily be perceived by the group as remedial procedures designed to assist a group unable to cope with a threatening, challenging situation. This in turn is likely to escalate the group's effort to maintain its positive image. In short, these strategies may have the unintended consequence of aggravating rather than inhibiting groupthink processes when SIM pressures exist. Traditional recommendations that involve exposing the group to outsiders (such as outside experts and trusted associates) and to members advocating viewpoints conflicting with the group's preferred solution can result in either the cooptation or the marginalization of these nonconformists. If group members can actively select these outside evaluators (see Janis, 1982), they will likely select associates and experts who subscribe to the group's preferred solution and thereby enhance the group's identity. In contrast, when dissenters cannot be coopted, they are likely to become objects of outgroup discrimination, be treated as deviants, and be marginalized or even excluded by the group.

In addition, tactics such as assigning the role of critical evaluator to all group members, dividing the original group into subgroups to enhance evaluation, the use of second chance meetings to reevaluate the decision, and the construction of alternative scenarios to examine consequences of the preferred decision may have the unintended consequences of structuring the group discussion to support the preferred decision rather than to critically evaluate it. For example, assigning the role of critical evaluator to each member may actually produce superficial conflict around peripheral issues that do not substantially threaten the group's preferred decision or the group's identity. Similar outcomes would be expected with the use of subgroups, second chance meetings, and the construction of alternative scenarios. Some existing case analyses provide evidence for this proposition. For example, in analyzing the decision of the Johnson White House to escalate the Vietnam War, Janis (1982) notes that groups can limit objections to issues that do not threaten to shake the confidence of the group members in the rightness of their collective judgments. Interestingly, such a strategy allows the group to report that it actually tolerated dissent and encouraged full evaluation—both positive and negative—of the group decision even though it actually did not. This in turn enhances the image of the group as a competent, objective evaluator.

Our analysis of the traditional recommendations further underscores the tightrope one must walk in implementing tactics to prevent groupthink. On the one hand, the traditional procedures *do* directly stimulate conflict and

discussion. On the other hand, they may do so in ways that intensify the negative repercussions of threat and cohesion and further aggravate the group's tendency to engage in identity protection.

What Are the Unique Constraints for Designing Interventions for Groups Operating under SIM Pressures?

The social identity maintenance approach underscores three unique constraints that are characteristic of groupthink situations. These constraints set limits on the design and implementation of strategies promoting effective group decision making under groupthink conditions.

First, the situation in which most groups susceptible to groupthink find themselves requires a common group decision. In short, the group must subscribe to and support a unitary group decision. This requirement makes the use of such strategies as the induction of competitive pressures which foster disunity extremely problematic (unless an authoritarian leader can exert dominance over the group, which in turn likely leads to more groupthink pressures).

Second, a groupthink-type situation involves threat. As we have discussed above, threat has a number of consequences for group decision making. These include the intensified focusing of attention and the self-protective motivation that is enhanced by a social identity. Under groupthink conditions, these consequences have overarching implications for the group's decision process and outcomes. The group's paramount goal becomes the attempt to ward off a negative image implicated by potential failure in responding to a collective threat. For example, the induction of competitive pressures under these conditions is likely to intensify the threat (see Deutsch, 1973 for a discussion of competition effects) which in turn will intensify the focus of attention and aggravate self-protective tendencies.

Finally, the SIM model suggests that a group may adopt a variety of strategies in service of that collective effort and that these strategies may impair decision processes and outcomes. This in turn highlights the complexity of the groupthink phenomenon and the resulting intricacies of adequately designing and implementing interventions that can adequately handle these myriad self-protective strategies.

Intervention Strategies Suggested by the SIM Perspective: Stimulating Evaluation and Reducing Identity Protection

According to the SIM model, the prevention of groupthink is predicated on two overall goals: the stimulation of constructive, intellectual conflict and the reduction of social identity maintenance (see Turner & Pratkanis, 1994, 1997). Clearly, the stimulation of constructive conflict is a paramount goal of these interventions. As groupthink arises from the failure to adequately capitalize on controversy, procedures designed to stimulate conflict are unquestionably applicable. However, the SIM perspective highlights the risks of inappropriately implementing interventions. Procedures designed to stimulate intellectual conflict may appear to be effective in warding off groupthink. However, a

SIM perspective suggests that they will do so only when they do not intensify the group's tendency to engage in identity protection. In short, these strategies must be designed so that they ideally support or at least do not threaten the group's identity. In the next two sections, we examine two sets of prescriptions for preventing groupthink. The first provides tactics for reducing pressures toward identity protection; the second concerns procedures for stimulating constructive conflict.

Reducing Pressures Toward Identity Protection

The social identity maintenance model of groupthink suggests three interventions likely to be capable of diminishing the collective effort directed toward warding off a negative image of the group. These include the provision of an excuse or face-saving mechanism, the risk technique, and multiple role-playing procedures.

1. *Provide an excuse or face-saving mechanism for potential poor performance.* One method of reducing the need for groups to engage in identity protection strategies is to provide an excuse for potential poor performance. Turner *et al.* (1992) found that groups operating under SIM groupthink conditions (i.e., experiencing a collective threat to a group identity) who were given an excuse for poor performance performed significantly better than groups working under groupthink conditions without such an excuse. Thus, the reduction of identity protection pressures seem to allow groups to mitigate groupthink tendencies and to produce higher quality decisions.

2. *The risk technique.* A second effective strategy for reducing pressures toward identity protection is an application of the risk technique (Maier, 1952). The risk technique is a structured discussion situation designed to facilitate the expression and reduction of fear and threat. The discussion is structured so that group members talk about dangers or risks involved in a decision and delay discussion of any potential gains. The process emphasizes a reaction to or reflection of the underlying content of the risks associated with a particular decision or situation. Following this discussion of risks is a discussion of controls or mechanisms for dealing with the risks or dangers. Research with this technique has demonstrated its usefulness in clarifying and reducing fears and threats with a variety of groups including factory workers, students, and managers (cf. Maier, 1952). This technique would seem especially applicable in groupthink situations that produce strong pressures toward identity protection, especially as it encourages objective evaluation and control of these tendencies (see also Tjosvold & Johnson, 1983, for a discussion of managing emotions during controversy).

3. *Multiple role playing procedures.* This process can be accomplished through two procedures. First, group members may assume the perspectives of other constituencies with a stake in the decision. For example, in the Challenger and Hubble incidents, group members might have been asked to assume

the roles of the federal government, local citizens, space crew families, astronomers, and so forth. A second approach focuses on the internal workings of the group. Each member can be asked to assume the role or perspective of another group member. This approach facilitates the confrontation of threats and rationales for decisions (cf. Maier, 1952) and allows the development of multiple perspectives. Fisher, Kopelman, and Schneider (1996) recommend that parties adopt perspectives of themselves, of others involved in the situation, and of neutral observers and explore each party's objectives, interests, and current positions or favored recommendations. (See George, 1972 for an application of this technique in governmental settings that uses decision makers with varying initial solution preferences; see also our discussion of dispute resolution below.)

Summary. These strategies can be very beneficial to decision-making groups. Most fundamentally, they can reduce the emotional impact of threat to the group social identity by facilitating the identification and salience of alternative groups. The procedures also serve to legitimize or even institutionalize the expression of threat, emotion, and concerns about the group identity. Role-playing can provide additional sources of information that can impact the decision itself, provide alternative perspectives on information already at hand, and provide needed perspective on the attack on the group identity. However, alone, they are likely to be ineffective in promoting effective decision performance. The following set of recommendations are designed to accomplish that goal.

*Procedures for Stimulating Constructive Cognitive Conflict under
Groupthink: A SIM Perspective*

Researchers and practitioners both have long promulgated the benefits of stimulating intellectual conflict (see for example, Deutsch, 1973; de Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997). Recent reviews of group effectiveness lend support to the beneficial view of intellectual conflict. Pavitt (1993), for example, suggests that the process of reflective thinking (i.e., problem identification and proposal generation, evaluation of proposals and alternatives, and solution selection), may be characteristic of high quality group decisions (see also Guzzo & Salas, 1995; Moreland & Levine, 1992; see van de Vliert & de Dreu, 1994 for a discussion of conditions leading to the effective use of conflict stimulation).

Procedures for stimulating intellectual conflict in groups generally have three objectives: (a) stimulating the generation of objectives and solution alternatives, (b) encouraging the evaluation of alternatives, and (c) influencing optimal solution selection while promoting reevaluation of decisions. However, these general procedures need to be adapted to groupthink conditions. When implemented in groupthink situations where SIM pressures are operative, these procedures should be designed to facilitate the critical evaluation of ideas, assumptions, and plans in ways that are supportive rather than threatening to the group identity. In general, the prescriptions mandated by the SIM model differ in substance (although not necessarily in intent) from the traditional recommendations for overcoming pressures toward uniformity. The SIM model

prescriptions for enhancing intellectual conflict tend to be much more detailed so that they serve to structure the decision process to a greater extent than do traditional recommendations. This additional structure may have distinctive advantages for groups operating under groupthink conditions. First, by structuring the decision, they serve to institutionalize the evaluative procedure, thus separating it from the group identity. Indeed, if implemented appropriately, these procedures can enhance the collective pride of the group when linked to the group's identity as a competently functioning team. Second, these procedures provide members with more specific strategies for evaluating alternatives and decisions. This specificity is particularly important when heightened threat serves to narrow the focus of attention (cf. Turner, 1992) and when identity protection motivations are exacerbated.

In the following sections, we discuss three such techniques for structuring group decisions: structured discussion principles, procedures for protecting minority opinions, and directed decision aids.

1. Structured discussion principles. Maier (1952) presents extensive research demonstrating the efficacy of structured discussion in enhancing group effectiveness. These techniques provide recommendations for establishing procedures that clarify responsibility, analyzing the situation, framing the question or decision, gathering information, structuring consideration of alternatives, frequently soliciting further suggestions, providing evaluation, and so forth. The goal of these recommendations is to delay solution selection and to increase the problem-solving phase. These interventions attempt to prevent premature closure on a solution and to extend problem analysis and evaluation. These recommendations can be given to the group in a variety of ways. One method is to provide training in discussion principles for either only the group leader or for all members. This approach may work well when there is sufficient time, resources, and motivation to complete such a program. A second method is simply to expose group members to these recommendations. For example, groups may be given guidelines that emphasize (a) the recognition of all suggestions but continued solicitation of solutions, (b) the protection of individuals from criticism, (c) keeping the discussion problem-centered, and (d) listing all solutions before evaluating them. Turner and Pratkanis (1994) found that highly cohesive, threatened groups (i.e., groups under groupthink conditions) given these types of structured decision guidelines produced significantly higher quality decisions than did high-cohesion, threatened groups not given these guidelines. Rosenthal and 't Hart (1989) suggest that the management of the decision process was key to the prevention of groupthink and the overall effectiveness of the resolution of the South Moluccan hostage situation. (See also Maier, 1963 for a discussion and Wheeler and Janis, 1980 for adaptations of these principles).

A second approach to structured discussion is the constructive controversy approach developed by Tjosvold (see, for example, Tjosvold, 1991, 1995). Under this approach, the superordinate cooperative goal of effective performance is coupled with specific mechanisms ensuring that issues are explored thoroughly,

diverse opinions are stimulated, and opposing ideas are sought and integrated into a final solution. Specific tactics include the establishment of norms favoring the expression of opinions, doubts, and uncertainty, the consultation of relevant sources (including those who are likely to disagree), the implementation of constructive criticism of ideas rather than people, and the integration of solutions rather than the use of zero-sum choice procedures (see Tjosvold, 1991, 1995 for further details and a persuasive review of the supporting evidence).

A third approach useful in orchestrating group discussions can be adapted from the dispute resolution arena. Fisher *et al.* (1996) provide a particularly detailed list of tactics designed to integratively resolve conflict. Fisher *et al.* recommend that parties follow certain guidelines that enable the: (a) exploration of partisan perceptions (as in the multiple role-playing procedures outlined above), (b) analysis of perceived choices, (c) generation of fresh ideas, and (d) implementation of a solution. Although initially designed to resolve rather than stimulate conflict, these tactics can be readily adapted to achieve opinion diversity in situations where groups might experience groupthink stemming from SIM pressures. For example, the analysis of perceived choices would entail the systematic appraisal of the consequences (including personal, political, organizational, interpersonal, and so forth) of proposed action plans for stakeholders. Particularly useful are the recommendations for generating and considering new alternatives. These tactics include a methodical evaluation of the problem, the causes, general approaches, and specific action plans in light of precise criteria such as goals, options, legitimacy, commitments, and so on that are fully spelled out before the decision process begins. The implementation of a solution likewise involves both a detailed analysis of the preferred recommendation and the solicitation of constructive criticism. We suggest that this general approach might be particularly useful for groups operating under groupthink conditions when it is accompanied by the simultaneous reinforcement of a superordinate goal and the reduction or channeling of emotions stemming from social identity pressures.

2. Establishment of procedures for protecting minority opinions. These procedures are critical because some groupthink research demonstrates that groups can actually generate high quality decision alternatives but frequently fail to adopt them as their preferred solution (Janis, 1982; Turner *et al.*, 1992). The protection of minority opinions may be one method of facilitating the evaluation and subsequent adoption of more effective solutions. Nemeth (1992) presents evidence that simple exposure to minority opinions can enhance performance by increasing the cognitive resources devoted to the task and by increasing search and evaluation of novel solutions (see also Nemeth & Staw, 1989; Peterson & Nemeth, 1996). Maier and Solem (1952) found that groups simply instructed to encourage discussion and participation of all members produced significantly better decisions than did groups without those instructions.

One pitfall of these procedures may be that members are disinclined to provide their true opinions and are fearful of being marginalized or excluded

from the group. When that happens, strategies for protecting minority opinions should ideally be combined with identity reduction strategies and with some of the structured decision guidelines discussed above.

3. *Use of directed decision aids.* At least three procedures have been designed to structure the decision itself. First, the developmental discussion technique is a decision aid designed to direct the evaluation into logical steps and into positive action channels. This technique is particularly useful in the development and exploration of ideas and the analyses of barriers and conditions interfering with actions and for solving problems for which group members have adequate skills but tend to form judgments on an impressionistic basis. The technique involves the solicitation of all opinions and the systematic appraisal of objectives and alternatives (cf. Maier & Hoffman, 1960a, for specific guidelines).

A second strategy for structuring or directing the evaluation process is called the "two column method." This technique requires that all aspects of the situation be listed, advantages and disadvantages of each aspect be considered and rated, and finally systematic appraisals are made of methods for securing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages (cf. Maier, 1952, 1963).

Finally, one simple technique that may be especially useful when group members operate under time pressure or are resistant to more structured methods is to require groups to identify a second solution or decision recommendation once the first has been submitted. In short, this technique tends to enhance the problem solving and idea generation phases of the discussion and can significantly enhance performance quality (Maier & Hoffman, 1960b).

Summary. These prescriptions have several advantages for groupthink situations involving SIM conditions. First, they acknowledge that groups must make an interdependent decision. Members are likely to be reluctant to engage in tactics designed to ineluctably split the group or make it appear inadequate. These procedures all clearly contravene that fear. Second, these strategies serve to structure the decision making process. This structure benefits the group by harnessing the effects of threat on the focusing of attention. Thus, rather than focusing solely on the presentation of a positive image induced by identity cohesion, the group concentrates on effectively solving the problem at hand.

When Interventions Are Threatening: Stimulating Evaluative Discussion and Reducing SIM Pressures

These approaches do not guarantee success. Much prior research shows that people evaluate conflict extremely negatively (see, for example, O'Connor, Gruenfeld, & McGrath, 1993) and are motivated to avoid it. We can predict that groups operating under groupthink conditions would be especially susceptible to these pressures and might interpret conflict as threatening the group identity. As we have seen earlier, groups are extremely flexible in the ways in which they can attempt to protect their identity. In order to project an image

of an effectively functioning team, a group might superficially adopt these procedures and, for example, structure the discussion around issues that are peripheral to critical evaluation but give the appearance of constructive conflict. In this way, the group maintains unity, supports its image, appears to fully discuss and evaluate the decision, and yet continues to advocate an ineffective solution. In such cases, we offer three pieces of advice: (a) make the intervention early in the groupthink-type situation before collective rationalization becomes the norm, (b) introduce strategies that can reduce, obviate, or redirect identity protection motivations (as discussed above), and (c) link the intervention strategy to the identity in a supportive rather than threatening way.

How might this be implemented? Neck and Moorhead (1992) have identified an interesting "non-example" of groupthink that may be illustrative. According to Neck and Moorhead, the jury at the trial of *U.S. v. John DeLorean* exhibited many of the antecedents of groupthink; however, they did not exhibit the poor decision making consequences of group think. One reason that this jury may have avoided groupthink processes is that the social identity of being a jury (in certain situations) is associated with a careful, critical analysis of the case. Similarly, the scientist is expected to bend over backward to prove him or herself wrong rather than right on matters related to scientific investigation. According to the General Code of Operating Rules (1994), safety is the responsibility of every member of the railroad; if a safety violation is spotted, each railroader (no matter what the status in the group) has the authority (and indeed, is required) to stop immediately all railroading activity on a track and report the incident immediately and to continue reporting the incident until it is rectified. In other words, the social identity of jurors, scientists, and railroaders is intimately linked to critical appraisals of the situation.

From a SIM perspective, linking a social identity to critical analysis provides a number of benefits. First, it makes constructive conflict a second nature response and thus one that is likely to emerge in a threatening situation. For example, in railroading, the derailing of a train immediately prompts all employees of the railroad to search for safety problems and implement necessary procedures. Second, developing a social identity which emphasizes critical analysis can be a source of self-esteem. For example, the railroader who stops the train and prevents a derail is a hero; in case of false alarm where the train is stopped but there is no problem, the individual railroader may be kidded about the incident, but is still seen as doing his or her job and ultimately praised for the action. One problem, of course, with this recommendation is that the social identity may be held in name (we believe ourselves to be critical), but not in deed. This underscores the necessity of constantly reinforcing the appropriate social identity and teaching the requisite skills for implementing it.

Thus, strategies can be introduced in a variety of ways. The crucial elements of these tactics are that they be implemented as ways of handling the threatening situation and in a manner which supports and enhances the group's identity rather than threatening it.

CONCLUSION

The social identity maintenance model views groupthink as a collective effort to maintain a shared positive view of the functioning of the group in the face of a collective threat. Group members are truly engaged in a struggle to protect their collective identity from the potential failure to adequately handle that threat. This collective identity protection may have disastrous consequences for both the group and outsiders who experience the consequences of the group's decision. Yet, this perspective also provides some unique insights into how and when groupthink can occur and what can be done to overcome the adverse consequences of groupthink when social identity maintenance pressures exist.

We now can answer the question posed at the beginning of this article: Yes, the actions of Mrs. Keech and her followers are an example of groupthink. However, it is groupthink of a particular nature—one involving a threat to a collective social identity. We believe that the SIM model represents one way of looking at groupthink: the group members' efforts to collectively reduce the potential damage from threat and to ward off negative images of the group that fosters, in Janis's' terms (1982, p. 167), "the genuine sharing of illusory beliefs."

However, by answering yes to this question, the SIM model prompts another question: Are there other routes to groupthink? The papers in this special issue all suggest that the answer to this question is also yes. Many of the articles develop their own version of how and why groupthink occurs. We believe that this represents research progress. Instead of asking if groupthink exists, the present wave of groupthink research attempts to specify the conditions under which normal, everyday groups might exhibit the dysfunctional processes associated with the term groupthink. The result should provide a more fine-grained analysis of the links between the antecedents and consequences of the groupthink process and should yield the type of understanding that will prevent groups from making the types of decisions that result in the loss of millions of dollars and of the human life.

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