



2019

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Recommended Citation

Aldstadt, Kathryn (2019) "Don't Rock the Boat: How Groupthink Keeps Society Complicit in their Domination," *The Mall*: Vol. 3 , Article 6.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol3/iss1/6>

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Don't Rock the Boat: How Groupthink Keeps Society Complicit in their Domination

Kathryn Aldstadt

When we hear the phrase “don't rock the boat”, we are warned against disturbing a relatively stable situation, whether that be for the better or the worse. This phrase is used to keep people from sharing their conflicting viewpoints and staying submissive to the majority's opinion. In the 1970s, a notable psychologist named Irving Janis further elaborated on this phrase with the term groupthink, or our tendency to obey what the majority or those in power believe in order to reach a consensus and avoid possible conflict or consequences, and the most common example of this is the Jonestown mass suicide. Aside from the real life examples of groupthink at work, the fictitious stories of *The Hunger Games* (2012), “The Lottery” (1948), and “Harrison Bergeron” (1961) exemplify the detrimental effects of groupthink on already oppressed people.

The term groupthink was first coined by the psychologist Irving Janis in the late 1970s, and it primarily encompasses preserving harmony, even if that leads to horrendous decisions. Most commonly, the incident of Jonestown in the 1970s is used to explain how powerful the idea of groupthink is. To preface this, Jim Jones started a church called The People's Temple, and this was based upon his Evangelical Christian and communist beliefs. Once he amassed followers by traveling throughout the country to host rallies, the group moved to Guyana to live in utopian society known as Jonestown. Jim Jones was able to convince his followers to undertake a mass suicide by drinking cyanide-laced punch. This tragedy was commented on by reporter Tim Reiterman, who stated that:

‘Peoples Temple was – as many communes, cults, churches and social movements are an alternative to the established social order, a nation unto itself, he wrote in *Raven*. ‘The Temple I knew was not populated by masochists and half-wits, so it followed that the members who gave years of labor, life savings, homes, children and, in some cases, their own lives had been getting something in return,’ (Conroy).

As we can interpret from this quote, the people of Jonestown had a great sense of loyalty toward Jim Jones for providing a self-sustaining utopia. When it came time to drink the poisonous punch, the members did not speak

out against it because everybody was doing it, and a dissenting opinion would cause uproar in their community. This mentality can prove detrimental for unbiased decision making because it forces the minority to obey what the party in power, like Jim Jones, believes and fear retaliation. Moreover, since members did not see other members actively fighting the system, they believed everyone agreed and that they would stand alone (Conroy). Likewise, this mass-mindedness and absolute control can be applied to numerous fictitious examples, as well.

In the award-winning trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, written by Suzanne Collins and directed by Gary Ross, twelve districts face oppression from The Capitol by being forced to compete in the Hunger Games. As the propaganda for the games plays before the reaping, viewers can see how the games are depicted as a “peacekeeping resolution” to past rebellion. Additionally, the audience can see how the games have been occurring for over 70 years, and because of that, almost nobody remembers a time without them, so all citizens have grown up accustomed to this torment. Therefore, since nobody remembers a time without them, no one dares to venture into the unknown by dismantling the system and reverting to life before the games.

Later in the film, the audience can see how citizens of The Capitol, the upper class that holds all of the power, fully enjoy the games. However, one can postulate that if even a few members of the Capitol, who would still hold more power than the districts combined, were to speak out against the games, they would likely cause a quicker change throughout Panem. Sadly, the citizens of The Capitol have never spoken out against this brutal form of entertainment, yet they do not feel any form of remorse or guilt for this decision. That is because with groupthink, the individuals themselves do not feel personally responsible for the consequences of the group’s decisions and actions even if they were pivotal in making that choice. To clarify, this is similar to the bystander effect, for someone assumes that another will do something, and that thought process proves to be detrimental. For example, if you need help and yell “somebody call 911!” into a crowd, it is much less likely that someone will assist you than if you point at a person and yell “you call 911!” In this real-life example, we can see how the idea of groupthink causes individuals to not feel personally responsible for the group’s actions despite being able to alter the actions, and this demonstrates itself with The Capitol’s silence towards the games.

Throughout the trilogy, viewers observe the brutal retaliation faced by the districts from The Capitol as a result from their rebellion. Because of this, citizens in the districts are forced to collectively stay submissive out of fear. However, when Katniss is brave enough to start this revolution and stop the groupthink mentality that is overcoming the country, citizens start to follow in her footsteps to dismantle the system. Overall, when applying Irving Janis’ concept of groupthink to this fictional series, we can not only see how a

multitude of factors, such as punishment, has kept the districts from rebelling even sooner but also how one person breaking free of that mindset empowers the rest to do the same.

Likewise, the short story “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson encompasses the concept of groupthink and its deadly consequences, as well. In this story, a town draws names out of a black box to determine who will be stoned to death that year. In the very beginning of the story, the narrator describes how since the town is relatively small, the lottery is finished quickly so that they will, “...still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner” (Jackson 1). This strikes readers as very ironic because it shows how the villagers feel no remorse as they enjoy their meal after literally stoning an innocent person to death. This then ties into the concept of groupthink, for the individual villagers feel no guilt for their actions because everyone participated equally. Additionally, Old Man Warner, the oldest member of the community, leads readers to believe that this system has been occurring for at least 77 years. Therefore, nobody remembers a time without the lottery, so nobody questions its existence because it’s all they know. Later on, when Old Man Warner hears about a neighboring town neglecting the system, he states that there is “Nothing but trouble in that” and that they are a “Pack of young fools,” (Jackson 2). This further exemplifies the concept of groupthink by showing how citizens will face disapproval, all though not physical punishment, if they disagree with whatever practices are in place. Throughout this story, readers can analyze how groupthink mentality allows such a barbaric practice like stoning to continue into a civilized society.

Lastly, the story “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. exemplifies the effects of groupthink but with much less deadly consequences. In this story, all citizens are made to be true equals by wearing a handicap, such as a mask to hide their beauty or an earpiece to disrupt their thoughts. This system was put in place by several amendments to the U.S. Constitution and the United States Handicapper General, which symbolize the authority and people in power.

Throughout the story, we can see the consequences of citizens even merely debating removing their handicaps, for when George Bergeron, Harrison’s dad, contemplates that the beautiful ballerinas should remove their handicaps, a large ringing plays in his earpiece to disrupt his thoughts (Vonnegut 1). Additionally, when Hazel Bergeron, Harrison’s mom, suggested that George should relax and remove the birdshot canvas bag that was secured to his neck, he testified that he will get, “Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out,” (Vonnegut 2). These two examples show the key points of groupthink in how the citizens are punished for disobeying the laws, and they have learned from others who tried to do the same. Therefore, they all collectively remain complicit in their abuse. However, when their son Harrison Bergeron was brave enough to break free

from his constraints, he encouraged and empowered the musicians and dancers to do the same, which resulted in a beautiful display of talent and grace (Vonnegut 5). Although they were able to perhaps inspire the television viewers to do the same, the Handicapper General Diana Moon Glampers came in and murdered them on live television, which further perpetuated fear of revolt in the general public. Although Harrison did not serve as much as a catalyst for change as Katniss did, it would be right to hypothesize that his act inspired more people to rise up and revolt in the future, leading to a possible rebellion.

Overall, the concept of groupthink is widely used in getting peoples' compliance with a harmful system. In all three examples, *The Hunger Games*, "The Lottery", and "Harrison Bergeron", readers can see how long-standing methods and traditions held up by authority figures prove difficult, if not impossible, to demolish. However, if one brave soul, like Katniss Everdeen or Harrison Bergeron, dare to break this mold, then they may spark a revolution and cause others to follow their lead. When reviewing these past deadly real-life examples and the mimicking fictitious stories, people can realize that when we're warned "don't rock the boat," disobeying may be for the better.

Works Cited

Conroy, J Oliver. "An apocalyptic cult, 900 dead: remembering the Jonestown massacre, 40 years on." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, 17 Nov. 2017.