

“I wouldn’t fall for that!” Exploring social influence and group decision making

Samentha Sepúlveda 

Department of Communication, Media and Theatre, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, USA

This single-class activity augments the popular desert island activity to include a secret insider who aims to influence their group covertly. The motivation for this augmented activity is twofold: (1) to highlight and dispel notions of invulnerability to groupthink and (2) to provide an opportunity to engage in small-group decision making. To facilitate these goals, this paper presents an experiential learning activity that makes tangible several theoretical constructs of persuasion and decision making in small groups. Examining how people within groups influence one another is vital to understanding how decisions are made.

Courses: This single-class activity is grounded in the theoretical orientation of social influence within small groups and is therefore suitable in persuasion, small-group communication, and any other course that discusses group decision making, group conformity, groupthink, and/or compliance gaining.

Objectives: Working in small groups to solve a problem, students will apply, evaluate, and comprehend concepts of social influence, group decision making, and groupthink. In completing this activity and a subsequent debriefing, students will demonstrate their learning by debating and justifying their individual choices, formulating their group decision, and discussing and identifying the impact of groupthink on decision making within small groups.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 October 2022

Accepted 15 February 2023

Introduction and rationale

This paper presents a modified activity that people often use in team building and ice-breaker scenarios. In the activity, individuals choose three items from a list of 18 that they would select to survive on a desert island. Differentiating the activity presented here is the inclusion of accomplices known in research as confederates. The presented activity was born from a desire to illustrate the real-time effects of social compliance on decision making in small groups.

Several years into my teaching career, I recognized a pattern each time I reviewed groupthink. Groupthink “is a mode of thinking that persons engage in when *concurrency-seeking* becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisals of alternative courses of action” (Janis, 1991, p. 237). The pattern I discovered was that students reacted as though they were somehow immune to the

harmful effects of social conformity. My observations align with the first symptom of groupthink: invulnerability (Janis, 1991). Reflecting on pivotal social compliance research (Asch, 1951; Milgram, 1963), using confederates could effectively highlight invulnerability as a symptom of groupthink.

Another prevalent theme that motivated this activity, which is not exclusive to the classroom, is the tendency to sequester decision making as merely the “activities of groups in meetings,” thus overlooking “just how much persuasion of group members actually occurs in other settings for other reasons” (Duck & McMahan, 2018, p. 200). Not only is decision making prevalent, but engaging in group decision making has its benefits. For example, scholars argue that “many of the problems of individual decision-making can be mitigated if individuals join with others to make decisions in a group” (Bang & Frith, 2017, p. 6). Groups can pool information, take advantage of the wisdom of the crowd, or rely on a majority vote to make a group decision. However, group decision making has obstacles. Through herding, conformity, and social influence, individuals sometimes “adapt to each other’s knowledge through group interactions” (p. 8). Exploring group decision making is valuable for examining its benefits and challenges, especially considering how often this activity occurs.

In sum, the motivation for this activity is twofold: (1) to highlight and dispel notions of invulnerability to groupthink and (2) to engage in small-group decision making. To facilitate these goals, this paper presents an experiential learning activity that makes tangible several theoretical constructs of persuasion and decision making in small groups.

The activity

Orientating the students

Instructors should preassign readings to orientate students to social influence and group decision making. For example, Chahine et al. (2017) provide a theoretical framework for group decision making. The authors also include a summary of processes used by groups to deliberate members’ varied perspectives, which include argumentation, comparison, and compliance. Additionally, Bang and Firth’s (2017) review of the decision-making literature highlights the positive aspects of group decision making and offers recommendations on how groups can make better decisions.

Preparation and required materials

Students should organize themselves into small groups of three to five people. Randomly, the instructor should assign the role of confederate (those individuals who act as accomplices in research studies) to one person in each group. The groups should form a circle so that they can easily communicate with one another. After forming the groups, the instructor should provide students with a two-sided worksheet. One side of the worksheet should contain pictures of 17 items (a compass, knife, book, matches, axe, cord, camping tent, dog, water bottle, steak, flashlight, camera, quilt, radio, guitar, magnifying glass, and sunglasses). The instructions for the activity should be on the opposite side of the worksheet. The randomly selected confederates receive a different set of instructions

than non-confederates. This activity, including debriefing, typically takes 75 minutes to complete in a class of 22 students.

Instructions

The instructor should begin the activity by passing out the worksheets. For instance, for a group of five, the instructor would pass out four non-confederate worksheets and one confederate worksheet. Next, the instructor should communicate the objective of the assignment: “In small groups, you will engage in decision making. Your goal is to review the items depicted on this worksheet. Then, decide which three items are essential to survive on a desert island.” Next, with emphasis, the instructor should stress that each person ought to read the entire set of directions to themselves before beginning the assignment or communicating with their group.

The directions listed on the worksheet for the non-confederate group members are as follows:

- (1) Review the survival items.
- (2) What three items do you think are essential for survival on a desert island? Make and record your selections.
- (3) Once each member of your team has chosen their three items, share them with each other.
- (4) After each group member has shared their selections, engage in a group discussion to decide which three items your group will ultimately settle on to ensure your survival on a desert island.
- (5) Be prepared to share your group’s selections and brief reasoning for why you selected those items.

The directions listed on the worksheet for the confederate group members are exactly the same for steps 1–4. The deviation occurs in the step 5:

- (5) **Top Secret:** You are a confederate (a secret insider). This means that while your other team members are trying to decide their three items (step 2), you have already been assigned your three items. Instead of you deciding on three items, you will try to influence your team that the steak, the camera, and the bottle of water are the items your team needs to survive on the island. Do not tell your team members that you are a confederate.

Debriefing

Upon completion of the activity, the instructor should lead everyone in a discussion and debriefing. To facilitate this, instructors should ask a series of questions. After each question, they should pivot into brief lectures to help students unpack what they have just experienced. This approach engages students in experiential learning and builds upon the preassigned reading that students completed in preparation for this activity.

The series of questions and lectures should start with the following question: How did your group decide which items you would select? A brief lecture could highlight and identify the three processes that group members use in their deliberations. These processes include: argumentation, “where group members discuss and justify their pre-conceived decision yet are open to being influenced by the knowledge voiced by other members” (Chahine et al., 2017, p. 195); comparison, “where group members voice and share their decision preferences in comparison to other member’s preference, yet are open to change” (p. 195); and compliance, “where group members voice the decision preferences they believe will gain them social approval in their group” (p. 195).

After the first question, the instructor should reveal the use of confederates by asking them to please stand and share their role as influencers with the class. The instructor should then ask: Were the confederates successful in influencing the rest of your group? Why or why not?

A brief lecture related to this question could contextualize the concept of social influence. Social influence occurs when people “adapt to each other’s knowledge because of a desire to fit into the group or through believing that others have better knowledge” (Bang & Frith, 2017, p. 8).

Finally, the instructor could ask the following: How might the role of a confederate alter the notion of freedom as it relates to persuasion? This question relates to the concepts of coercion and manipulation, which are sometimes conflated with persuasion, influence, and compliance gaining. A subsequent brief lecture could continue to contextualize social influence and, more specifically, how “individuals within a group can be influenced and how perspectives may change based on social pressures” (Chahine et al., 2017, p. 195).

Limitations

Whether a course is conducted in-person, online, via remote learning, or as a hybrid, and class size could present limitations to this activity. For example, given the need to assemble in groups, this activity would be difficult to complete in an asynchronous online course. However, instructors could adapt this activity for synchronous remote learning classes. Features such as breakout rooms to establish virtual groups and chat features to communicate with the confederates could be implemented without compromising the activity. Additionally, instructors could modify this activity for classes of more than 22 students by substituting the individual group discussions with one large group discussion. Finally, instructors can modify this project for many subjects within communication by revising the debriefing questions. While conceived for courses in persuasion and small-group communication, this activity could work in any introductory course that discusses group decision making, group conformity, groupthink, and/or compliance gaining.

Appraisal

This activity effectively highlights and dispels notions of invulnerability to groupthink, provides an opportunity to engage in small-group decision making, and develops students’ conceptual understanding of social influence. Students have audible reactions

when I reveal the role of the confederates. Gasping, they admit that they “had no idea.” While the confederates are only successful roughly 40% of the time, the resulting discussion is nonetheless compelling. Unsuspecting non-confederate group members eagerly engage in discussion to explain their decision to comply with the confederates.

Furthermore, this activity influences subsequent in-class interactions. Because students did not expect the role of a confederate in this activity, students are sometimes leery of future activities, resulting in an arguably positive side effect of prompting students to be reflexive and critical consumers of persuasive events. Students scrutinize future interactions with one another, potentially increasing their ability to understand and apply the principles of social influence. Finally, this activity exposes students to the use of confederates in social science research. Students read several studies that use confederates in persuasion and other communication courses. Acquiring first-hand knowledge improves students’ comprehension of how confederates operate within these studies.

ORCID

Sametha Sepúlveda  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4728-6515>

References and suggested readings

- Asch, S. E. (1951). Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In H. Guetzkow (Ed.), *Groups, leadership and men; research in human relations* (pp. 177–190). Carnegie Press.
- Bang, D., & Frith, C. D. (2017). Making better decisions in groups. *Royal Society Open Science*, 4(8), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.170193>
- Chahine, S., Cristancho, S., Padgett, J., & Lingard, L. (2017). How do small groups make decisions? A theoretical framework to inform the implementation and study of clinical competency committees. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 6(3), 192–198. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-017-0357-x>
- Duck, S., & McMahan, D. T. (2018). *Communication in everyday life*. Sage.
- Janis, I. (1991). Groupthink. In E. Griffin (Ed.), *A first look at communication theory* (pp. 235–246). McGraw Hill.
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 371–378. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040525>

Copyright of Communication Teacher is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.