

There aren't just bad people that commit genocide; we are all capable of it. It's our evolutionary history. –James Lovelock

Genocide is an attempt to exterminate a people, not to alter their behavior. –Jack Schwartz

What is Groupthink?

Groupthink, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment” (p. 9). Groups affected by groupthink ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions that dehumanize other groups. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making.

Symptoms of Groupthink

Janis has documented eight symptoms of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability –Creates excessive optimism that encourages taking extreme risks.
2. Collective rationalization – Members discount warnings and do not reconsider their assumptions.
3. Belief in inherent morality – Members believe in the rightness of their cause and therefore ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups – Negative views of “enemy” make effective responses to conflict seem unnecessary.
5. Direct pressure on dissenters – Members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group’s views.
6. Self-censorship – Doubts and deviations from the perceived group consensus are not expressed.
7. Illusion of unanimity – The majority view and judgments are assumed to be unanimous.
8. Self-appointed ‘mindguards’ – Members protect the group and the leader from information that is problematic or contradictory to the group’s cohesiveness, view, and/or decisions.

When the above symptoms exist in a group that is trying to make a decision, there is a reasonable chance that groupthink will happen, although it is not necessarily so. Groupthink occurs when groups are highly cohesive and when they are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision. When pressures for unanimity seem overwhelming, members are less motivated to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action available to them. These group pressures lead to carelessness and irrational thinking since groups experiencing groupthink fail to consider all alternatives and seek to maintain unanimity. Decisions shaped by groupthink have low probability of achieving successful outcomes.

References

Janis, Irving L. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Janis, Irving L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Second Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin

The 8 Stages of Genocide © 1998 Gregory H. Stanton (genocidewatch.org)

The International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines "genocide."

"In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Acts of genocide During the Rwandan genocide, the U.S. State Department's lawyers infamously directed U.S. diplomats to avoid use of the word genocide. Only "acts of genocide" were being committed, they said. It was a distinction without a difference. The crime of genocide is defined by the Genocide Convention as "acts of genocide." It does not exist apart from those acts. A pattern of acts of genocide is frequently called "genocide" and evidence of such a pattern of ethnic, racial, or religious massacres is strong evidence of genocidal intent. The Convention declares the following acts punishable: "(a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide;

The Genocide Process

Genocide is a process that develops in eight stages that are predictable but not inexorable. At each stage, preventive measures can stop it. The later stages must be preceded by the earlier stages, though earlier stages continue to operate throughout the process.

1. CLASSIFICATION:

All cultures have categories to distinguish people into "us and them" by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality: German and Jew, Hutu and Tutsi. Bipolar societies that lack mixed categories, such as Rwanda and Burundi, are the most likely to have genocide.

The main preventive measure at this early stage is to develop universalistic institutions that transcend ethnic or racial divisions, that actively promote tolerance and understanding, and that promote classifications that transcend the divisions. The Catholic church could have played this role in Rwanda, had it not been riven by the same ethnic cleavages as Rwandan society. Promotion of a common language in countries like Tanzania or Cote d'Ivoire has also promoted transcendent national identity. This search for common ground is vital to early prevention of genocide.

2. SYMBOLIZATION:

We give names or other symbols to the classifications. We name people "Jews" or "Gypsies", or distinguish them by colors or dress; and apply them to members of groups. Classification and symbolization are universally human and do not necessarily result in genocide unless they lead to the next stage, dehumanization. When combined with hatred, symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups: the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule, the blue scarf for people from the Eastern Zone in Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

To combat symbolization, hate symbols can be legally forbidden (swastikas) as can hate speech. Group marking like gang clothing or tribal scarring can be outlawed, as well. The problem

is that legal limitations will fail if unsupported by popular cultural enforcement. Though Hutu and Tutsi were forbidden words in Burundi until the 1980's, code-words replaced them. If widely supported, however, denial of symbolization can be powerful, as it was in Bulgaria, when many non-Jews chose to wear the yellow star, depriving it of its significance as a Nazi symbol for Jews. According to legend in Denmark, the Nazis did not introduce the yellow star because they knew even the King would wear it.

3. DEHUMANIZATION:

One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder.

At this stage, hate propaganda in print and on hate radios is used to vilify the victim group. In combating this dehumanization, incitement to genocide should not be confused with protected speech. Genocidal societies lack constitutional protection for countervailing speech, and should be treated differently than in democracies. Hate radio stations should be shut down, and hate propaganda banned. Hate crimes and atrocities should be promptly punished.

4. ORGANIZATION:

Genocide is always organized, usually by the state, though sometimes informally (Hindu mobs led by local RSS militants) or by terrorist groups. Special army units or militias are often trained and armed. Plans are made for genocidal killings.

To combat this stage, membership in these militias should be outlawed. Their leaders should be denied visas for foreign travel. The U.N. should impose arms embargoes on governments and citizens of countries involved in genocidal massacres, and create commissions to investigate violations, as was done in post-genocide Rwanda.

5. POLARIZATION:

Extremists drive the groups apart. Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda. Laws may forbid intermarriage or social interaction. Extremist terrorism targets moderates, intimidating and silencing the center.

Prevention may mean security protection for moderate leaders or assistance to human rights groups. Assets of extremists may be seized, and visas for international travel denied to them. Coups d'état by extremists should be opposed by international sanctions.

6. PREPARATION:

Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity. Death lists are drawn up. Members of victim groups are forced to wear identifying symbols. They are often segregated into ghettos, forced into concentration camps, or confined to a famine-struck region and starved.

At this stage, a Genocide Alert must be called. If the political will of the U.S., NATO, and the U.N. Security Council can be mobilized, armed international intervention should be prepared, or heavy assistance to the victim group in preparing for its self-defense. Otherwise, at least humanitarian assistance should be organized by the U.N. and private relief groups for the inevitable tide of refugees.

7. EXTERMINATION:

Extermination begins, and quickly becomes the mass killing legally called "genocide." It is "extermination" to the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human. When it is sponsored by the state, the armed forces often work with militias to do the killing. Sometimes the genocide results in revenge killings by groups against each other, creating the downward whirlpool-like cycle of bilateral genocide (as in Burundi).

At this stage, only rapid and overwhelming armed intervention can stop genocide. Real safe areas or refugee escape corridors should be established with heavily armed international protection. The U.N. needs a Standing High Readiness Brigade or a permanent rapid reaction force, to intervene quickly when the U.N. Security Council calls it. For larger interventions, a multilateral force authorized by the U.N., led by NATO or a regional military power, should intervene. If the U.N. will not intervene directly, militarily powerful nations should provide the airlift, equipment, and financial means necessary for regional states to intervene with U.N. authorization. It is time to recognize that the law of humanitarian intervention transcends the interests of nation-states.

8. DENIAL:

Denial is the eighth stage that always follows a genocide. It is among the surest indicators of further genocidal massacres. The perpetrators of genocide dig up the mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses. They deny that they committed any crimes, and often blame what happened on the victims. They block investigations of the crimes, and continue to govern until driven from power by force, when they flee into exile. There they remain with impunity, like Pol Pot or Idi Amin, unless they are captured and a tribunal is established to try them. The best response to denial is punishment by an international tribunal or national courts. There the evidence can be heard, and the perpetrators punished. Tribunals like the Yugoslav, Rwanda, or Sierra Leone Tribunals, an international tribunal to try the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and ultimately the International Criminal Court must be created. They may not deter the worst genocidal killers. But with the political will to arrest and prosecute them, some mass murderers may be brought to justice.

Prep for the Graded Discussion:

1. What reactions do you have to the Lovelock and Schwartz quotations? What other quotations on genocide have you heard before?
2. Which of the elements of groupthink seem most dangerous? Most conducive to genocide?
3. We should make some fuss about genocide being a "predictable" process. What do the eight stages of genocide tell us about human nature? Human behavior in groups?