

When Groups Engage in Faulty Decision Making: A Look at  
Euro Disneyland, Dalkon Shield, Churchill Falls, and Tuskegee

A Response

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Each of the four papers prepared for this panel, in its own way, addresses group/organizational decisions of questionable merit and offers a theoretical account of how they came about. On the whole, I find the papers to be well conceived and well developed. Most of my concerns center on matters of style, and I have indicated them throughout the marked copies that I am returning to the authors. For the time I have available, I have decided to concentrate on how each panelist might have dealt differently with his or her paper topic and, I hope, more effectively with some aspects of the analyses.

In her paper, Amy Aldridge examines the debacle associated with the opening of Euro Disneyland and how the decision reflected inadequate attention to looming constraints on effective decision-making processes among those most intimately involved. The park, according to Aldridge, opened to a less than enthusiastic public, not to mention staff, reception and was on the verge of a potentially colossal failure. She then proceeds to explain the reasons for the less than optimum decision in terms of Irving Janis's Constraints Model, with particular emphasis on those he labels as "cognitive" and "egocentric." Given a felt pressure to establish a presence in Europe and to overcome corporate financial problems, Disney executives relied on the inappropriate analogy of events in Tokyo and did not take the time to explore the decision in terms of French culture. In respect to the influence of egocentric constraints, Aldridge suggests that Michael Eisner's need for a major success blinded him to certain realities the company was up against. This led to the adoption of an autocratic style of leadership that adversely affected the prospects for making a judicious set of choices concerning new enterprise.

In the part of the paper dealing with failure in decision making, Aldridge does well. She turns her attention later to a reversal in fortunes, in which she suggests that Disney improved its

decision making and, in the process, enjoyed substantial gains. What is not clear, however, in Aldridge's discussion of the turn-around is what the decision makers did differently to overcome the sorts of constraints that earlier limited their decision-making effectiveness. In short, she leaves the reader with an understanding of how the Constraints Model helps one to understand ineffective decision making related to the opening of Euro Disneyland, but not how it enables one to account for the reverse when effective decision making was in evidence.

Stephanie Rollie takes an interesting look at A. H. Robbins's decision to market the Dalkon Shield in the face of inadequate testing for safety of this intrauterine device and later decisions to deny culpability when the device proved to be unsafe in many cases. In the process, she takes the reader on an interesting historical excursion of the events and then attempts to account for the poor decision making along the way in terms of the Rational Actor Model, Functional Theory, and Vaughn's Model of Organizational Culture as a determinant of decision making in general and poor decision making in particular, which is the one she endorses. The essence of the argument is that some organizational cultures foster misperceptions of risk and, thereby, lead decision makers to make assumptions about the comparative safety of measures that, objectively speaking, could be disastrous in their consequences.

In reading the paper, I was not clear why Rollie felt obliged to consider the case in terms of three perspectives on group decision making since, to my knowledge, at least, no one else has offered a different explanation as superior to the one that Vaughn's work supports. Given that, Rollie's assessment of the applicability of the Rational Actor and Functional Theory perspectives seems a bit like straw-man arguing. Personally, I would have preferred to see a more elaborate explanation of the perspective that Rollie thinks best accounts for A. H. Robbins's approach to

its highly questionable decisions concerning the Dalkon Shield.

Daniel Chornet-Roses's paper deals with a decision to construct a dam in Labrador in northeastern Canada.. This decision, when implemented, proved to have devastating consequences for the environment and for the Innu, the native people residing in the area. Chornet-Roses attempts to account for this conspicuously poor decision in terms of the failure of the decision makers involved to address one of the several requirements that Functional Theory specifies--namely, assessing the negative qualities of decision options. Why they failed to do so, however, in Chornet-Roses's estimation, is not evident within the confines of Functional Theory. Consequently, he attempts to draw on a body of work suggesting the possible presence of a cultural constraint that may have contributed to the development of certain kinds of insensitivities to who and what could be adversely affected by the decision to build the Churchill Falls Hydroelectric Dam project.

The main difficulty I have with the paper is not substantive, but rather organizational. Chornet-Roses goes on for well past twenty (nearly thirty) pages before he takes up the unfortunate consequences of the decision to move forward with the project. In my view, it would have been much better to discuss such matters at the beginning and then to attempt to make sense of the process by which the decision came about. In addition, irrespective of the most efficacious or appropriate placement of this part of the discussion, Chornet-Roses pays little attention to the consequences. He asserts their existenc<sup>d</sup>, but does not document them very well. As a result, the disproportionate emphasis on theory leaves one wondering why it is that we need an explanation of the decision in the first place.

In her study of the decision making involved in the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment,

Rebecca Imes explains what, in retrospect, appears to be an almost incomprehensible commitment to persist in a several decade-long investigation of a species of venereal disease that it eventually was well within the power of those involved to treat. As did Rollie in her paper, Imes provides the reader with a detailed reconstruction of historical events in which she notes the questionable decisions that occurred throughout.

Having established what was questionable, if not outright indefensible, about the series of related decisions in the case, Imes sees as her essential task the effort to account for them, which she does specifically in terms of Conrad's Organizational Communication Model. For the most part, Imes succeeds in establishing that interconnections among the cultural, formal/structural, personal/interpersonal, and political power dimensions of the United States Public Health Service contributed to the formation of an internal perception that the advance of scientific knowledge is more important than the well-being of those who are contributing to it and, therefore, to an objectification of them.

Although Imes does well in identifying the factors of interest in the organization responsible for the generation and perpetuation of the controversial experiment, I am not sure that she has enough evidence to establish that the organization had the characteristics she attributes to it. At least, she talks about very few people in a large federal bureaucracy. This is not to suggest that her explanation is in error, but merely to question the foundation on which it rests. The abuse in the experiment was largely the product of a limited number of individuals. Imes may have been better off developing the position that the facets of organizational communication on which she chose to focus may have contributed to a climate in which such individuals could do the sort of harm she documents, but in which they were not directly

implicated or necessarily the cause. She might also have done more to place responsibility on specific individuals rather than assigning it to the organization in the sort of reified sense that she does.

Despite the deficiencies I have spent the last few minutes exploring, all four of the studies have considerable merit. In my opinion, they also represent the kind of inquiries that would enrich the inventory of findings relating to sound and injudicious forms of consequential decision making groups are often in the position of undertaking. I hope that all four of the presenters will, therefore, continue the lines of research on which they have embarked, or at least remain committed to doing such types of research.