

Notion of 'group think' questioned

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A University of Alberta researcher is questioning the notion of "group think"—a common psychological phenomenon—that has been used to explain some of the extreme things people do once they are within the confines of a group. Rob Wilson, a professor in the Department of Philosophy, rejects the popular idea that groups tend to have a mind of their own and says the notion of a collective mind is problematic.

"Groups are not thinking entities and do not share a collective consciousness," Wilson said. "The mind does not begin or end in the skull, but it's still the mind of the individual. It is individual minds, not group minds, that exists. The idea of group minds [is] either an ontological extravagance or an outright mystery."

In addition to arguing that groups don't have minds, Wilson says also in a recently published book, *Boundaries of the Mind*, that groups can have positive effects on people by helping them overcome challenges in their lives. He says groups (and by his definition "group" can mean two people) can play a key role in augmenting the cognitive abilities of individuals suffering from certain diseases, and could help those trying to lose weight.

"If someone is suffering from a [degenerative disease](#) and they're with a lifelong partner, they can remember things they couldn't otherwise recall, partly because they need their partner's support to compensate for their deficits, for example," Wilson said. "Likewise, someone in a dieting class would be able to regiment themselves and stick to a plan that's more demanding, more readily if they're in a group that's doing the

same thing. They get reinforcement from their group."

And Wilson says that in each instance, it is the individual doing the thinking and that the group acts as an extended cognitive system—an extension of the [mind](#)—that enhances the [cognitive abilities](#) of the individual members in a group.

Provided by University of Alberta

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