MedicalXpress

Can companies, political groups or organizations have a single mind?

December 5 2011

News of employee misconduct always creates a whirlwind for the companies involved — think of Enron, Goldman Sachs and UBS, for example. But are these firms responsible for the actions of their employees? Or do individual members have distinct and independent responsibility separate from a group's actions? New research from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and Boston College find that members of a cohesive group are judged to have less responsibility for their own individual actions.

The study suggests that the more people judge a group to have a "mind" — that is, the ability to think, intend or plan — the less they judge a member of that group to have his or her own capacity to think, intent or plan, and vice versa. This is the so-called "trade off" in the way people view the group versus the way they view individuals in the group.

This research, co-authored by Adam Waytz, assistant professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School, and Liane Young, assistant professor of psychology at Boston College, sought to explore this idea of "group mind," as well as the consequences of those attributions for both groups and their members.

According to the authors, the relationship between group mind and group-member mind has been largely unexplored, but it raises interesting questions about decision-making, blame and moral judgment.

"People attribute minds to other individuals and rely on mental state

inferences to explain and predict their behavior," wrote Waytz and Young. "Little is known, however, about whether people also attribute minds to groups and consider that collectives, companies and corporations can think, intend and plan."

Predicting that an inverse relationship exists between attributions of group mind and member mind, Waytz and Young conducted four experiments to support their theory.

The first experiment established the premise that the more "mind" that people attribute to groups, the less "mind" they attribute to group members. Waytz and Young asked participants to evaluate groups including specific corporations, professional sports teams and government entities on the extent to which each group has a mind of its own, the extent to which each average member of that group has a mind of his/her own, and the extent to which each group is cohesive. The results proved not only the original premise, but also that participants viewed cohesive groups as having particularly high group mind.

Given that group mind has critical implications for judgments of responsibility, the second experiment tested the consequences of assigning group mind by rating the extent to which groups are morally responsible for their collective actions, and the extent to which each group member is responsible for the collective actions of the group. As a result, when participants assigned a single mind to a group, they also assigned responsibility for that group's collective actions to the group's body of members.

The third experiment then tested the effect of perceived cohesiveness on assignment of group mind and responsibility, and found that groups perceived to be cohesive were assigned higher levels of both, and assigned low levels of individual minds within the group. As for the final experiment, Waytz and Young found that cohesive group members were

not assigned individual responsibility for individual actions taken on behalf of the group.

"The research can help explain how people justify hostility toward large collectives and how people come to treat members of groups as unique individuals," the authors wrote.

More information: The study, "The Group-Member Mind Tradeoff: Attributing Mind to Groups Versus Group Members," appears in the December 2011 issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Can companies, political groups or organizations have a single mind? (2011, December 5) retrieved 16 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-12-companies-political-groups-mind.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.