ANONYMITY IN GROUP SUPPORT SYSTEMS: PHILOSOPHICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES

ESTHER E. KLEIN, PH.D.*
Department of Business Computer Information Systems and Quantitative Methods,
Zarb School of Business, Hofstra University, 211 Weller Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA
E-mail: eklein9@aol.com OR acseek@hofstra.edu, Tel: (516) 463 – 4529, Fax: (718) 854 – 6175

CHALMERS C. CLARK, PH.D.
Dept of Pol. Sci., Eco. and Phil., College of Staten Island, CUNY,
2800 Victory Blvd., Rm. #2N – 231, Staten Island, NY 10314, USA
E-mail: chalmerscc@aol.com, Tel: (718) 982 – 2901, Fax: (718) 982 – 2888

PAUL J. HERSKOVITZ, J.D., M.B.A.
Department of Business, College of Staten Island, CUNY,
2800 Victory Blvd., Rm. #3N – 206, Staten Island, NY 10314, USA
E-mail: pjhersko@aol.com, Tel: (718) 982 – 2959, Fax: (718) 982 – 2965

1 INTRODUCTION

Although a staple of organizational life, group meetings are plagued with deficiencies [12]. For example, group members may be reluctant to express their opinions because of the fear of public speaking or of public comment on their ideas by others. In an attempt to neutralize the shortcomings of group work, group support systems (GSS), also known as groupware, have been designed to foster collaboration and decision-making within such groups. Specifically, GSS is an interactive computer-based information system that structures group interaction.

GSS is implemented by situating each group member at a computer workstation, which is connected to a network. The workstations can all be in the same room or can be geographically dispersed. Group members participate in a discussion by typing in their comments, which appear on the screens of all other members without identification of the contributing source. A key feature available in GSS, then, is the capability for group members to participate while remaining anonymous [12]. Following Wallace [17, p. 23], we define anonymity as "nonidentifiability."

The present paper explores philosophical issues related to two social psychological consequences of anonymity that stem from the lack of social cues — the absence of gender cues, with the resultant equalization of male-female participation, and deindividuation, with the resultant weakening of social norms and constraints. Studies have suggested that the absence of gender and other status cues eliminates biased devaluation of contributions [12]. Thus, an advantage of anonymity in GSS-supported groups is that it encourages group members to propose and criticize ideas. However, anonymity also has serious disadvantages, including deindividuation.

2 ABSENCE OF GENDER CUES, JUSTICE, AND AUTONOMY

Researchers have found that women have lower participation rates in face-to-face mixed gender decision-making groups than do men. For example, women in such groups tend to suppress their ideas in part because of evaluation apprehension. The problem of unequal participation of women in group decision making is an especially serious one when women today constitute 50% of middle management [3]. The denial of an equal voice for women deprives management of a full range of views and suppresses creative ideas. Expectation states theory suggests that inasmuch as society accords men a higher status than women, men's contributions to the group task will be perceived by group members as having greater value than those of women (see, e.g., [16]) and thus women will be reluctant to express their ideas.

The use of GSS, which allows for anonymous interaction, provides an environment in which gender and all other status cues are absent, thereby ensuring that the contributions of each group member are judged solely on merit and not on the external characteristics of the contributor [7] [12]. Klein and Dologite [12] found that mixed gender groups using GSS generated ideas that were as innovative as the ideas generated by all-male or all-female groups using GSS. Specifically, mixed gender GSS groups generated ideas that were as innovative as the ideas generated by same gender GSS groups on all the measures of innovativeness that were analyzed: novelty, usefulness, feasibility, a novelty-usefulness-feasibility composite item, and an overall creativity item. Explaining their findings by reference to expectation states theory, Klein and Dologite [12] have suggested that the anonymity feature of GSS eliminates gender as a status characteristic and thus equalizes participation by allowing for the evaluation of ideas without the distorting influence of gender.

From the vantage point of moral philosophy, as well as of common sense notions of fair play, it is desirable that decision-making groups are guided by principles of justice. The anonymity feature of GSS promotes the value of justice in that it allows equal participation by all group members irrespective of external status characteristics, including gender.

The most often cited conception of justice is Aristotle's principle of formal equality, which holds that equals should be treated equally and that unequals should be treated unequally [1] (see also [2, pp. 328-329]). Thus, in decision-making groups, contributions of equal merit, as a matter of justice, should be evaluated equally. Moreover, justice requires that all members should have equal opportunities to participate. In fact, building on the work of

Rawls, for whom "the fundamental idea in the concept of justice is fairness" [15, p. 47], Daniels [4] views the "fair equality of opportunity" as an essential component of justice.

To the extent that in traditional face-to-face groups — where women's contributions are devalued and inhibited because of negative gender stereotyping — equal contributions are evaluated differentially or to the extent that a member's contributions are discouraged, the principle of justice is violated. The use of anonymity-featured GSS, by contrast, promotes justice by fostering fair equality of opportunity. The absence of gender cues in GSS-supported groups eliminates constraints on equality by allowing for the fair valuation of contributions by all group members in that contributions are evaluated on their inherent worth irrespective of the gender of the contributor. Additionally, by enabling the latter, GSS provides women with equal access to the group decision-making process, which encourages their participation and thus equalizes male-female participation rates.

Because GSS encourages collaboration *within groups*, a philosophical examination of GSS's impact on the autonomy of *individual group members* is in order. Autonomy refers to individual self-determination and includes "personal rule of self that is free from … controlling interferences by others" [2, p. 121]. For Kant [10], autonomy is a value because not to treat individuals as autonomous agents is to treat them as merely means to ends and not as ends in themselves, a violation of his categorical imperative, a universal law binding on all. Viewing autonomy through a utilitarian prism, John Stuart Mill [13] holds that it fosters the development of the individual in accordance with his or her personal convictions.

The absence of gender cues in GSS-supported groups promotes autonomy in two ways. Firstly, the absence of gender cues fosters the full participation of women by not allowing for the devaluation of women's contributions. Secondly, anonymity promotes the autonomy of the group members who are evaluating the ideas of fellow members by ensuring that the former's evaluations are not influenced by biases against women. According to Hill [8, p. 50], "People are not self-governing, in a sense, when their responses to problems are blind, dictated by neurotic impulses of which they are unaware, *shaped by prejudices* [italics added] at odds with the noble sentiments they think are moving them." Anonymity, then, frees group members from the constraints of negative stereotypes.

3 DEINDIVIDUATION AND THE "RING OF GYGES SCENARIO"

The absence of a social presence made possible by the anonymity offered by GSS may result in deindividuation [9], a state of reduced self awareness wherein individuals act as if they were submerged in a group, leading to a weakening of social norms and a reduction of inner restraints [5]. Jessup, Connolly, and Tansik [9] have advanced the notion that anonymity in GSS-supported groups undermines external social controls and thus leads to a reduction of internal restraints. Anonymity, then, is a double-edged sword. It allows group members to propose ideas that they would not put forward if their contributions were identified. But, anonymity also encourages antisocial behavior, such as group members being "overly caustic in their evaluations" of the contributions of other members [9, p. 339]. Moreover, the loss of inhibitions and the dehumanization that characterize deindividuation may result in flaming, which refers to the making of hostile comments (see [11]). In the absence of public scrutiny, then, verbal distraction and aggression undermine the decision-making process.

Deindividuation produces what Wallace [17, p. 31], employing a myth related by Plato [14], characterizes as a "Ring of Gyges scenario," wherein anonymity confers immunity against the consequences of bad behavior. Specifically, Wallace [17] uses the Ring of Gyges scenario as a metaphor for this dark side of anonymity in cyberspace. In *The Republic*, Plato [14, pp. 37-38] recounts a famous story of the law-abiding shepherd Gyges, who, finding a ring that enables him to become invisible and to do as he pleases without fear of reprisal, acts upon his basest desires. According to Wallace [17, p. 31], this parable suggests that "anonymity . . . provides space for action with impunity, and hence, the Ring of Gyges scenario." Wallace's [17] adoption of the Ring of Gyges scenario to refer to situations involving loss of constraints and lack of accountability parallels its use in the legal literature, where the expression "ring of Gyges" is utilized in connection with situations that provide "opportunities to do wrong without suffering the consequences" [6, p. 1232].

The Ring of Gyges scenario poses a serious danger for GSS-supported groups. Group members may be tempted to engage in flaming and other antisocial activities because they are "invisible" like Gyges in that they cannot be identified. The injection of personal animus or irrelevancies into the group setting may distract the group from the task at hand and even subvert decision-making processes. Proposals by fellow group members may be judged without the requisite impartiality, but rather evaluation of ideas may be driven by private agendas. Harassing comments may inhibit the voicing of innovative ideas and discourage participation in general. Anonymous and therefore unaccountable, GSS-supported group members run the risk of being unconstrained by ethical demands for there are no bad consequences to deter bad behavior. Far from fostering productive group decision making, anonymity-featured GSS may provide a destructive free-for-all.

4 CONCLUSIONS

An ethical analysis of two social psychological consequences of the anonymity conferred by GSS indicates that anonymity is a two-edged sword. Specifically, in allowing for the evaluation of group members' contributions solely on the basis of merit irrespective of gender, the absence of gender cues advances the values of justice and autonomy. Deindividuation, on the other hand, invites a Ring of Gyges scenario, whereby bad and disruptive behavior is encouraged because of the lack of constraints made possible by the absence of a social presence. Thus, as suggested by Wallace [17], anonymity can promote both positively and negatively valued behaviors.

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