

**Stoner J A F. Risky and cautious shifts in group decisions: the influence of widely held values. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 4:442-59, 1968.
[Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA]**

In an experiment comparing individual and group decisions involving risk, group decisions tended to be more cautious on items where widely held values favored the cautious alternative and individuals considered themselves relatively cautious. Group decisions tended to be more risky when the converse of these conditions existed. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 110 publications since 1968.]

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November 12, 1982

"Late in 1960, I was 'shadowing' General James M. Gavin (ret.), president of Arthur D. Little. I was working on a group term project for Warren Bennis's leadership seminar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's management school. Gavin observed, *en passant*, that councils of war were abandoned during the Civil War because the group process yielded excessively cautious decisions...and fighting was requires taking risks. His comment struck a responsive chord: I was frequently frustrated by the cautiousness of groups in which I worked.

"Earlier that year, I had decided to do my master's thesis with Donald G. Marquis, a fabulous thesis adviser.¹ Comparing individual and group decisions involving risk eventually became our topic. Michael Wallach granted permission to use the 12-item Wallach-Kogan choice dilemma questionnaire and MIT graduate management students were our subjects.

"Rather than being more cautious than individuals as we had predicted, the groups were more risky on the questionnaire as a

whole. On only one item were they more cautious. Marquis was in Russia when the results came in and Wallach was quite helpful in guiding the analysis and early write-up.

"The thesis was widely replicated and a mini risky-shift-studying industry grew in the 1960s.² Many studies used choice dilemma items, but most ignored a 1962 master's thesis by Frode Nordhøy under Marquis. Building on the single cautious shifting item, Marquis and Nordhøy demonstrated that other cautious shifts could occur.^{3,4}

"In 1964, I started doctoral work at MIT. Marquis felt researchers were missing the boat by concentrating on risky shifting items and ignoring Nordhøy's work. He said, 'If you want to understand a phenomenon, look where it does not occur.' An independent study project with Marquis turned into the doctoral thesis which became the *Citation Classic* article. We showed that groups could be more cautious or more risky and predicted when that would occur—consistent with Nordhøy.

"There were no obstacles to publishing the doctoral article, but G.C. Hoyt and James F. Burns provided crucial support to me in surviving the thesis-writing process. The master's article I drafted in Africa a few months after the thesis defense was never published. When I returned from Africa in 1963, an embarrassed Marquis reported that the committeeman who took responsibility for getting it published had never submitted it to the agreed journal. Fortunately for me, Marquis had shared the research with Roger Brown, who built the group dynamics chapter of his excellent social psychology textbook around my and Nordhøy's theses.⁴ I started the doctoral program as a minor celebrity—discoverer of the risky shift.

"I think the doctoral article is widely cited because the risky and cautious shifts were (1) counterintuitive, (2) easily replicated for research or classroom demonstration, and (3) prominently discussed in Brown's widely adopted text. Perhaps some researchers cite it as a 'proxy' for the unpublished master's thesis. Finally, it may have helped move the research momentum from replicating and extending the risky shift to investigating a broader 'choice shift' perspective."

1. Stoner J A F. *Marquis' "laws" of dissertations*. New York: Fordham University, November 1982, Faculty of Business Working Paper #82-5.
2. Cartwright D. Determinants of scientific progress: the case of research on the risky shift. *Amer. Psychol.* 28:222-31, 1973.
3. Nordhøy F. *Group interaction in decision-making under risk*. Master's thesis. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, School of Industrial Management (Sloan School of Management), 1962.
4. Brown R. *Social psychology*. New York: Free Press, 1965. 785 p.
[Citation Classic. *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences* 13(7):16, 16 February 1981.]