

MINORITY INFLUENCE (this excerpt is only being used for language study purposes).

What is meant by minority influence?

Many European social psychologists have been critical of the American preoccupation with conformity and the power of the *majority*. Serge Moscovici, one of the foremost critics of this perspective, claims that the idea of an all-powerful majority simply does not fit with historical reality. If the only form of social influence was majority influence, then we would all think and behave in the same way, and this would be unchanging from generation to generation. History has shown just how powerful minorities can be. For example, the suffragette movement of the 1920s gradually changed public and political opinion so that eventually women were given the right to vote.

Minorities tend not to have much power or status and may even be dismissed as troublemakers, extremists or simply 'weirdos'. How, then, do they ever influence over the majority? Moscovici (1976) claims that the answer lies in the *behavioral style*, i.e. the way the minority gets its point across. The crucial factor in the success of the suffragette movement was that its proponents were consistent in their views, and this created a considerable degree of social influence. Minorities that are active and organized, who advocate and defend their position consistently, can create social conflict, doubt and uncertainty among members of the majority, and ultimately this may lead to social change. Such change has often occurred because a minority has converted others to its point of view. Without the influence of minorities, we would have no innovation, no social change. Many of what we now regard as 'major' social movements (e.g. Christianity, trade unionism or feminism) were originally due to the influence of an outspoken minority.

The difference between majority and minority influence

Innovation or status quo?

Majority influence is typically seen as maintaining the status quo, i.e. it is a form of social influence that is *resistant* to change. Majorities serve to promote uniformity among group members, and exert pressure on those who deviate from group norms. Minority influence, on the other hand, is associated with change and innovation, as the views of a deviant minority generate a social conflict with mainstream ideas, values and norms, the resolution of which may be represented as a movement towards the minority position (i.e. social change).

Compliance or conversion?

In order for minority influence to take place, there must be a conversion within individuals who were formerly part of the majority. This **conversion** involves a careful thinking through of the arguments of the minority and the gradual acceptance of its point of view. As a result, the process of minority influence is relatively slow to take place. Majority influence, on the other hand, is a far more passive process, as individuals comply with the majority position without a great deal of thought. This is referred to as the **dual-process model** of social influence (Moscovici, 1980), with majority influence representing the need for social approval and minority influence representing the need for social approval and minority influence about reality. Both lead to behavioral change, but each through different processes.

Imitation or originality?

Because minorities must work harder to get their position across, their arguments are thought to produce more cognitive effort in the majority than is the case with majority influence. Nemeth (1995) argues that by focusing the thoughts of the majority on the issue itself rather than the need to fit in with everyone else, the minority can set up processes that lead to far more creative thinking about the issue in question. She suggests that majority influence leads to restricted 'convergent' thinking based simply on imitation,

whereas minority influence leads to more 'divergent' thinking as alternatives are considered. As a result, a minority position, even if it is later not accepted, can lead to cognitive reappraisal among the majority that eventually leads to a better quality outcome.

Key term:

minority influence: a form of social influence where people reject the established norm of the majority of a group members and move to the position of the minority.

Conversion: a shift from one set of beliefs to another.

In a general sense, to 'conform' to something is to fit in with it or be molded by it. This means that the term 'conformity' could be used in relation to majority or minority influence. However, technically, psychologists have restricted the use of 'conformity' to situations of majority influence only.

(Excerpt taken from revised edition Psychology AS, the complete companion, Mike Cardwell and Cara Flanagan).