

Minority influence research: social psychology



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Minority influence research can be said to begin with Solomon Asch himself being influenced by Muzafer Sherif's (1936) classic study on group norms. Asch then went on to conduct his own famous study on conformity (majority influence) in 1951 and his subsequent finding that 37 percent of his participants conformed to a clearly erroneous majority opinion was a surprise for many in the field at that time.

What is often overlooked in this experiment, however, is that if 37 per cent of Asch's participants conformed then ipso facto 63 per cent were resolute in their minority opinion and did not conform, choosing instead to remain independent from the majority. It is this independence that is important for minority influence research, as without the creative thinking that it produces, society would not progress (Nemeth, 1986).

This essay will look at two of the giants in this arena of social influence research, namely Moscovici's (1980) Conversion theory and Turner's (1987) Self Categorisation theory in relation to the minority influence process, how these two theorists disagree with each other on this process and how later research has contributed to the debate with a final look at the possible implications for future research in both cognitive psychology and social psychology.

Moscovici (1969) was himself in the professional minority when he argued against the prevailing notion at the time that it is the majority in a group that influences the minority. In his opinion, it was also possible for a minority to exert influence over the majority as evidenced by such minority movements as Civil Rights, Gay Rights and the Suffragettes.

Moscovici first highlighted the issues of compliance and conversion.

Compliance occurs when individuals publicly conform to a new idea/position but privately reject it and Moscovici argues that it is this type of influence that majorities tend to exert. Majorities by sheer weight of numbers can induce pressure to conform and are therefore immune to a normative based influence. However, it is through informational based influence, (providing the majority with a new idea or information) that a minority can exert influence over the majority. Conversion occurs when individuals both publicly and privately conform to a new idea/position, (also known as internalisation).

Moscovici's (1980) conversion theory is based on the premise that when an individual is presented with new information that contradicts a currently held opinion, conflict arises. In order to reduce this conflict, the individual will firstly determine its source. If the source of conflict comes from a majority, the individual will use a social identification process in order to identify the majority's position and adjust their own to conform (compliance).

If the source comes from a minority, according to Moscovici, the individual will use a validation process in order to evaluate the minority's message so that they may better understand why the minority disagrees with the majority (conversion). Hence Moscovici (1980) is classed as a dual process model as it attributes majority and minority influences to different processes.

Turner, however, believes that influence comes from individuals that are categorised as similar to oneself. His (1987) Self Categorisation theory states that if a minority is to have any influence, the minority must be a sub-group of the individual's in-group and not an out-group, which includes the

assumption that individuals are in search of a positive identity. Any influence that a minority therefore exerts over the individual would be dependent upon the attributes that the individual associates with that minority.

Turner believes that individuals have both a need and an expectation of agreement with in-group members and of disagreement with out-group members and it is for this reason that influence will only pass between in-group members. Being both normative and informational makes Turner's theory a single process theory as you cannot split informational elements from normative elements of influence. However, Turner might find the ever increasing evidence from studies such as Perez & Mugny (1987) of influence occurring from out-group members rather uncomfortable.

Limitations in any research will present problems for future scientists, and minority influence research is no exception. It appears from current minority influence research that the focus has been narrowed to the cognitive aspects of individuals, without attention to the intergroup dynamics. Prislin & Christensen (2005) attempted to address this issue by devising their gain-loss asymmetry model of change in minority/majority positions.

Simply put, they investigated the two prevailing approaches to minority influence. The first focuses on attitude change as a result of successful minority influence (Alvaro & Crano, 1996; Martin & Hewstone, 2003), the second focuses on the quality of cognition when faced with a minority position (Nemeth, 1986). Both approaches are very reductionist in nature and fail to take into account just what happens to the group dynamics in the event of successful minority influence. Smith and Christensen (2005) drew

on prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) and self categorisation theory (Turner et al, 1987) to hypothesise about the consequences of successful minority influence in respect of group dynamics.

Smith and Christensen (2005) state that when a minority is successful and becomes the majority, the entire group may be comprised of the same individuals, but all that changes is the position (minority to majority and vice versa). However, reality is somewhat altered for those who have won or lost in the process. Those who have lost their majority position may have more intense negative reactions to this loss than the positive reactions experienced by those who have gained the majority position, thus the entire group is weakened and in need of regulation to restore functional mechanisms. Basically Smith & Christensen have conceptualised the social change that occurs at group level following successful minority influence and it is hoped that other social psychology researchers will follow suit in this regard.

In conclusion, the two main theorists in this essay, Moscovici and Turner, essentially disagree on two main points, firstly, on whether it is by being either an in-group or an out-group member that better facilitates influence, and secondly, whether influence is a single or dual process.

Subsequent research has endeavoured to settle this debate, with Crano & Alvero (1997) finding evidence for in-groups being more influential and Perez & Mugny (1987) finding evidence that it is out-groups that are more influential. While there is, as yet, no definitive evidence supporting one

theorist over the other, it is of note that as most of these studies were based on laboratory experiments, and therefore there remains the issue of the ecological validity of any of these findings.

On the issue of influence being either a single or dual process, Smith & DeCoster (2000) attempted to resolve this issue by conceiving their own new model supported by both psychological and neuroscientific evidence (McClelland et al., 1995; Sherry & Schacter, 1987). Based on the two separate memory systems (Short Term and Long Term) and how humans retrieve and store data from their environment, they theorize that humans make use of the same processing systems in social situations. Smith & DeCoster's (2000) integrative model strongly suggests the importance of language and social influences on individual cognition.

One system slowly learns repeated patterns, whereas the other can quickly form representations of new data. Data retrieval or pattern completion in the slow-learning system is provoked by a salient trigger from the individual's environment which fuels the automatic processing mode. The second processing mode requires more effort as it involves the intentional retrieval of specific, pertinent data from either of the two systems and its use to reduce conflict arising from an ambiguous situation.

Implications for future research as a result of this study have ramifications not only for cognitive psychology but social psychology as well. Hutchins (1995) argued that this insight demands a reformulation of cognitive science. The traditional information-processing approach focused on the individual, assuming that cognition was something that happened within individual

brains. However, any future psychological research now must recognize that cognition occurs within a social system, not simply within an individual brain (Clark, 1997; Hutchins, 1995). This notion now places social psychology at the very core of the cognitive sciences. The relationship between language, memory and socially structured cognition is an area in which social psychologists can continue to make pertinent and valuable contributions to psychological research.