

How can minority
groups achieve social
change?



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How can minority groups achieve social change? Discuss with reference to social psychological research and theory.

Social change can be defined as when across time social structures and cultural patterns change significantly (Leicht, 2013). Moscovici and Lage (1976) explains a minority as being numerically smaller than the majority group, however it could also just be a group thinking and acting outside the norm. So, minority influence is when a minority group is cause of social change. This essay will explore the different theories involved in minority influence, such as The Genetic Theory (Moscovici & Lage, 1976), and how that can eventually lead to social change. It will also look at factors that can influence how effective minority influence is, with a focus on consistency, which is a key behaviour style involved in minority influence, and flexibility, which is shown by Nemeth's (1977) mock jury study. Another area it will explore is Moscovici et al's (1969) blue green slide study, a key piece of research within minority influence, as well as some research that contradicts this.

Early social psychology research generally neglected the influence minorities can have on majorities, and tended to focus on majority influence (Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme, Blackstone & Steinberg, 1993). One of the first theories of minority influence is Moscovici et al's Genetic Theory (Moscovici et al, 1976) which looks at the generation and production of social change. Moscovici et al proposed the Genetic Theory as an alternative to the functionalist model, which was used in traditional conformity research. (Tanford & Penrod, 1984). The functionalist model suggests that the majority can influence the minority, but the minority can not influence the majority. Moscovici et al (1976) argued that social conflict would be the result of any

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attempt on social change, including minority. The Genetic model includes three processes; conformity, normalization and innovation. Conformity is where the conflict between the group and individual is reduced, and normalization is where conflict is avoided through compromise and innovation is applied by active and consistent minorities (Moscovici et al 1976). The Genetic Theory suggests that the majority shift towards the minority is as a solution to the conflict and restore social stability.

Minority influence does this by disrupting the norm and creating uncertainty by making people aware of this new idea. So, it demonstrates a difference to the norm with a sense of certainty, commitment and confidence, leaving the only solution being to shift towards the minority (Moscovici et al, 1976).

Moscovici et al (1976) also argued that majority influence only leads to people changing their views publicly whilst maintaining their private views (compliance), so social change isn't properly achieved. Whereas minority influence leads to people changing their views privately, but not necessarily publicly in order to save face (Moscovici et al 1976).

Some of the main factors that affect minority influence are behavioural style (Moscovici, 1969), style of thinking (Smith, Tindale & Dugoni, 1969) and flexibility (Nemeth, 1977). The first is behavioural style (Moscovici, 1969). Behavioural style involves consistency, confidence, appearing unbiased and resisting social pressure and abuse. Consistency, which is when a minority is consistent in the view they have, was stated by Moscovici (1969) to be the most important aspect of behavioural style. The second is style of thinking, which is getting the majority to discuss and talk about the ideas that the minority are suggesting. This has been shown to give the minority a good

chance of influencing the majority (Smith et al 1969) The third is flexibility and compromise, which was investigated by Nemeth (1977). Nemeth (1977) carried out a mock jury experiment and found that when the minority refused to change their position, there was no effect on the majority. But, when the minority compromised and agreed with some parts of the majority, the majority also compromised, resulting in the majority changing their view. However compromising clashes with the consistency theory as by being flexible and willing to change your view a bit that original view proposed by the minority is no longer consistent. Furthermore, mock jury experiments lack ecological validity in the sense that the decision made by the jurors will not actually have an effect on someone else's life, so they may be more likely to agree with other people's suggestions (Bornstein, 1999).

Although consistency has been shown to improve minority influence (Moscovici, 1969), it can be shown can have the opposite effect if the minority group are viewed to be activists (Bashir, Lockwood, Chasteen, Nadolny & Noyes, 2013). This finding came about in research into resistance to social change, specifically into people's perceptions of the minority group of people/activists attempting to cause social change. Bashir (2013) refers a lot to the example of feminists being the activist group trying to bring about social change. Activists are typically seen as being unpleasant and hostile, due to their method of bringing about social change by publicly criticising mainstream practices. These negative stereotypes associated with activists can cause resistance to minority influences trying to bring about social change. However, this doesn't necessarily mean they won't achieve social change, just that it may take a bit longer, as Wood et al (1993) shows with

the example of recycling. Recycling used to be seen as being promoted by extremist groups and is now a part of everyday life. This example of recycling also demonstrates another element of minority influence, the way people tend to forget that it used to be a minority view once social change has occurred.

A key study that shows minority influence is Moscovici, Lage and Naffrechoux (1969) blue-green study. The participants involved were split into groups made up of four genuine participants and 2 confederates. These participants were then shown 36 slides that were different shades of green or blue. The participants had to say out loud the colour that was on each of the slides they were shown. In the first half of the experiment the confederates, who were representative of the minority, were consistent and answered green every time, even when they were clearly wrong. In the second half they were inconsistent and occasionally answered blue instead of green. Moscovici et al (1969) found that when the minority were consistent it had an 8.42% effect on the majority, whereas when the minority were inconsistent it only had an effect on 1.25% of the majority. This shows that although the minority isn't always successful at influencing the majority it is more likely to do so when it is consistent. However, Clark and Maass (1990) carried out a similar study and found that the size of the majority can influence how effective minority influence is. Moscovici et al (1969) used only 4 people in his majority, but Clark and Maass (1990) found that when they increased the majority to 8 or 12 the minority no longer had an impact on the majority. Clark and Maass (1990) carried out two experiments and although the results were stronger in the second both still showed that an increased majority reduced minority

influence. So, this study contradicts Moscovici et al's (1969) findings as it suggests that had Moscovici et al increased the size of his majority during the study then the results may have been different, and he may have found the minority had less of an influence, which this brings into question the internal validity of Moscovici et al's study. However, Moscovici et al's blue green study is important as it is one of the first pieces of research that demonstrates the influence a minority can have on a majority.

Social change can be achieved by minority influence. Minority influence, as explained by The Genetic Model (Moscovici, 1976), as cited by Wood et al, causes social change as a way of resolving the conflict the majority has with the minority. For a minority to be more successful at causing social change their behavioural style (Moscovici, 1979), style of thinking (Smith, 1969) and ability to be flexible (Nemeth, 1977) are all important factors in this process. However, consistency, which comes under behavioural style, clashes with the idea of flexibility as the minority group cannot be both of these things at the same time, but despite this clash these are still important factors in minority influence. Having said that, flexibility isn't the only issue with consistency as it has also been found that too much consistency can cause people to view the minority group as activists, which results in them being seen in a negative light and therefore less likely to cause change (Bashir et al, 2013). But, the same research also shows how minority groups that have caused social change were once seen as activists, but it has just been forgotten worth society that they were once seen in a negative way (Bashir et al, 2013). So, despite the contradicting research consistency and flexibility both play a role in minority influence. Moscovici et al's (1969) green blue slide

study further shows how minority groups can achieve social change as it shows how a minority can affect the majority.

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