

Minority Influence

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Minority influence, a form of social influence, takes place when a minority, like an individual, influences a majority to accept the minority's beliefs or behaviour. There are two types of social influence: majority influence (conformity) and minority influence (innovation). Majority influence refers to the majority trying to produce conformity on the minority, while minority influence is converting the majority to adapt the thinking of the minority group. Unlike other forms of influence, minority influence usually involves a personal shift in private opinion. Minority influence is also a central component of identity politics.

How minority influence works

Minority influence is more likely to occur if the point of view of the minority is consistent, flexible, and appealing to the majority. Having a consistent and unwavering opinion will increase the appeal to the majority, leading to a higher chance of adaption to the minority view. However, any wavering opinions from the minority group could lead the majority to dismiss the minority's claims and opinions.

Majority influence occurs when people conform to certain beliefs and behaviours in order to be accepted by others. Unlike majority influence, minority influence can rarely influence others through normative social influence because the majority is indifferent to the minority's perspective of them. To influence the majority, the minority group would take the approach of informational social influence (Wood, 1994), or social proof. By presenting information that the majority does not know or expect, this new or unexpected information catches the attention of the majority to carefully consider and examine the minority's view. After consideration, when the majority finds more validity and merit in the minority's view, the majority group has a higher chance of accepting part or all of the minority opinion.

Although the majority group may accept part or all of the minority view, that fact does not necessarily indicate that the majority has been completely influenced by the minority. A study by Elizabeth Mannix and Margaret Neale (2005) shows that having the support from the majority leader could be the critical factor is getting the minority opinion to be heard and be accepted. The support of the leader gives the majority more confidence in the merit of the minority opinion, leading to an overall respect for the minority. The strength of the "key people" (Van Avermaet, 1996) comes from the reputation built from their consistency of behaviors and ideas. Involving key people will benefit the minority view because people are more open to hear from others who they trust and respect. In minority influence, a few influential leaders can influence the opposing majority to the minority's way of thinking. In the end, having a more supportive and active minority group could lead to innovative and better decision making.

Factors that affect minority influence

Size of minority

Moscovici and Nemeth (1974) both argue that a minority of one is more influential than a minority of more than one, as one person is more likely to be consistent over long periods of time and will not divide the majority's attention. He explains that a person may question themselves How can they be so wrong and yet so sure of themselves?, resulting in a tendency to reevaluate the entire situation, considering all possible alternatives, including the minority view. On the other hand, two people are more likely to be more influential than one person as they are less likely to be seen as strange or eccentric. More recent research has supported the latter due to the belief that a minority with two or more, if consistent, has more credibility and is therefore more likely to influence the majority. Large and growing minorities are influential. If the size of the minority does not grow, there is a possibility of a lone dissenter to change his position, affecting his consistency and credibility.

Size of majority

The social impact model (Latané and Wolf. 1981) predicts that as the size of the majority grows, the influence of the minority decreases, both in public and in private attitude change. The social impact model further explains that social impact is the multiplicative effect of strength (power, status, knowledge), the immediacy (physical proximity and recency), and the number of group members.

Clark and Maass (1990) looked at the interaction between minority influence and majorities of varying sizes, and found that, like Latané & Wolf's findings, the minority's influence decreases in a negatively accelerating power function as the majority increases. This is reflected in findings that minority support should decrease considerably with the first few members of the majority, but additional members will have a marginally declining impact on getting people to conform to the majority position.

Similarly, Latané and Wolf cite Solomon Asch's work with "the magic number three". After his experiments, Asch concludes that when the majority consists of just one or two individuals, there is very little conformity. The addition of a third majority member dramatically increases conformity, but increases beyond three did not result in increasing amounts of conformity.

Behavioural style

Serge Moscovici and Nemeth (1974) argued that minority influence is effective as long as there is consistency over time and agreement among the members of the minority. If this consistency were lost, then the minority would lose its credibility. This can be the case if a member of the minority deserts and joins the majority, as this damages the consistency and unity of the minority. After this

occurrence, members of the majority are less likely to shift their position to that of the minority.

Situational factors

Some studies have shown that a person's position may affect the level of minority influence they exert. For example, someone positioned close to another is more likely to influence the opinion and/or behaviour of that person. Furthermore, those positioned at the head of a table will have more influence than another in a less 'important' position.

In addition, the decisions of others may affect the potency of minority influence. Asch (1952) conducted a study in which test subjects would be accompanied one of two "partners" during a series of questions posed to a group: a) a partner that would agree with the subject's minority view, or b) a partner that would be more extremely incorrect than the majority. Asch found that regardless of the role of the "partner", the fact that the consensus was broken - even if by just one individual ("the magic number one") - was enough to reduce conformity to a majority, and add credibility to the minority view.

Studies on minority influence

Nearly all early research on minority influence focused on how the majority influenced the minority, based on the assumption of many psychologists that it would be very hard for the minority to have any influence on the majority. Moscovici had a different perspective, as he believed that it was possible for a minority influence to overcome majority influence. As a result, he conducted his own study on minority influence in 1969. His research was important as it was one of the first studies to show that a minority was able to change the opinions of the majority. It also showed the significance of consistency within the minority as this aspect is necessary if influence on the majority is to be achieved. The research of Moscovici and his colleagues opened the door to more research on the subject.

Group identification

Maass & Clark (1984) arranged for a group of heterosexual participants to hear a debate on gay rights. The results showed that the majority heterosexual group debating was easier for the heterosexual participants to relate to. Therefore, the minority homosexual group had less of an influence. Influence is more likely to occur if the minority (or majority) is part of our 'in-group' as we are more likely to be influenced by those who are similar to us. This research contradicts with Moscovici's view that deviant minorities (or out-groups) are essential for minority influence to occur. In-group minorities are more likely to be successful, as they are seen as part of the group, and therefore their ideas are seen as more acceptable. On the other hand, out-groups are more

likely to be discriminated, as they are not seen as part of the group, causing them to seem strange or unusual.

Yielding to minority influence

Social cryptoamnesia

After a number of members have shifted their opinion to agree with the minority group, that minority becomes a majority. Minority influence can be successful if people can dissociate between the socio-cognitive activities of resistance that are induced by the source and other activities of resistance that develop from the content of the message. The process of dissociation is explained by social cryptoamnesia: what was originally considered different is gradually constructed as an alternative (Perez, 1995).

A person can be affected by minority influence whether directly or indirectly. However, if one is not aware of the influence, the minority ideas could be taken as one's own while disregarding where the original idea came from. Social cryptoamnesia explains that thoughts and ideas that challenge or shock are stored in latent memory without retaining the ownership of the idea. Ideas that were supposedly forgotten have reappeared in the person's mind as his or her own belief or thought. This major attitude change takes place when the zeitgeist has changed. In history, minorities have changed the attitude of society, and the attitude of society have changed the personal opinion of the majority in that society. Although minority influence may not affect a person immediately, one's beliefs and behaviors may change over time due to social cryptoamnesia.

Broadening views in organizations

By integrating the theory of minority influence in organizations, people will be more open to learning and allow for change, benefiting the organization in the end.

Moscovici (1980) contends that more introspective, personal thought processing is required in considering dissenting views, accounting for the private adoption of minority positions. In addition, increased processing improves the quality of the decision because the increased time it takes to reach a decision allows for more alternatives to be considered. Moscovici summarizes, "novel correct solutions are capable of being detected."

Increasing diversity in the workplace

Not only is minority influence seen in social groups, but this type of social influence is also present in the workplace. Incorporating the concept of minority influence can encourage diversity and change in a corporate organization. Mannix and Neale (2005) performed a case study on a

company that asked all the senior managers to mentor junior managers, preparing at least three younger managers to be ready and competent enough to replace the older managers. From this study, the firm realized that they were not achieving the extent of diversity that they intended. As a result, the company required at least one of the three junior managers in training to be a woman or underrepresented minority. This new requirement improved the intended diversity in the organization as well as the interaction between the senior manager mentor and the junior manager mentee.

Improving organizational values and culture

In another study by Mannix and Neale, yearly performance evaluations were completed for Hispanic, African American, and Asian managers. Their performance reviews evaluated the managers on less tangible measures related to leadership, an essential factor that is considered for receiving a promotion. Upon reflection of the company's performance evaluations, a senior leader suggested that the criteria on which managers were assessed was biased toward a "white, Anglo management style" (Mannix, 2005). As a solution, the leadership performance and promotion criteria of the performance reviews were revised. From this change and inclusion of minority influence, managers were able to learn from their strengths and weaknesses and change. Along with changing the criteria of performance evaluations, the organization itself underwent a change in values and culture.

Further research

Minority and majority influence combined

There is evidence that suggests that it is possible for minority influence and majority influence to work together. A study by Clark (1994) uses a jury setting from the film 12 Angry Men to investigate social influence. Some of the participants were asked to just read the arguments from one of the characters (who acted as the minority), while the other group were also told how he changed the opinion of the rest of the jury. Social influence was present in both groups, but was stronger in the group that was exposed to both the arguments (minority influence) and the knowledge that the jury conformed (majority influence).