

HOW SOCIAL INFLUENCE RESEARCH HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND SOCIAL CHANGE, AND THE ROLE OF MINORITY INFLUENCE IN SOCIAL CHANGE

Social change refers to a major change in the social structure of a society, or some widespread change in the behaviour of the people in that society. This could be anything from a major revolution (e.g. the overthrowing of Communism) to introducing the requirement that we recycle as much as we can.

Several studies have shown that people will change their behaviour if they believe that the majority of people have changed theirs. For example, Nolan et al (2007) showed that if people in a neighbourhood are exposed to a message which says that most of the neighbourhood are committed to conserving energy, they will engage in that behaviour as well. Similarly, Goldstein et al (2007) showed that a sign in a hotel bathroom saying "Join your fellow citizens in helping to save the environment - Please reuse your towels", was more effective than signs simply saying "Help save resources for future generations" or "Help save the environment".



Southern California Has a Water Shortage

FULL

EMPTY

NOW

The water reserve levels in Southern California are at an all-time low and we're getting drier. We need your help to save water.

It is our policy to launder guest room linens every three days for those guests staying multiple nights. If you would like your linens changed more frequently, we are happy to honor your request.

If you wish to have your bed linens changed, please place this card on your pillow in the morning.

By reusing your linens, you can help us save 4,000 gallons a month.

Can numerical minorities influence numerical majorities?

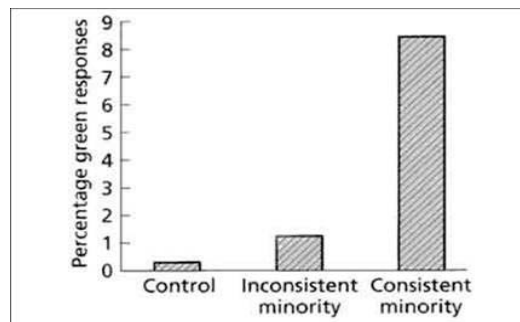
The above studies are examples of numerical majority influence. However, other researchers have looked at how **numerical minorities** can influence numerical majorities and bring about social change. The most-well known researcher in this area is **Serge Moscovici**. He carried out an experiment in which six participants were required to judge the colour of 36 slides,

all of which were *blue* but of differing brightness. Two of the participants (the minority) were stooges, whilst the other four (the majority) were naïve participants. In one condition, the stooges were told to **consistently** describe the blue slides as *green*.



Blue or Green?

Moscovici found that 32% of the naïve participants called a blue slide green at least once, and overall the blue slides were called green on 8.4% of the trials. In another condition, the stooges were told to call the slides green 24 times and blue 12 times. When the minority behaved **inconsistently**, conformity the blue slides were called green on only 1.5% of the trials. This study shows that a numerical minority can influence a numerical majority, but that this influence is more likely to occur if the minority behaves consistently.



According to Hogg & Vaughan (1998), a consistent minority is influential for several reasons. For example, it **disrupts the majority norm**, and **produces uncertainty and doubt**, it **draws attention to itself** as an entity, and conveys the existence of an **alternative, coherent point of view**.

In other studies, Moscovici showed that numerical minorities can influence numerical majorities:

- When they are seen to be acting from **principle** rather than out of self-interest

- When they are seen to have made a **sacrifice** in order to maintain their view
- When they express a view which is **consistent with current social trends** (e.g. environmental issues)

As noted previously, by far the most important behavioural style is **consistency**. A minority which is consistent in its viewpoint will signal to the majority that it is **committed** to its position. If the minority is committed, it is harder to ignore, and sends the signal that there is an alternative to the majority viewpoint. Once a few members of the majority start to move towards the minority position, a **snowball effect** occurs as more people gradually pay attention to the potential correctness of the minority view. A good example to use here would be the Green Party or those who advocate vegetarianism. Once seen as 'fringe lunatics', both of those viewpoints not have a significant minority (if not a majority) following.

THE SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT

The suffragettes were able to produce social change by using the techniques of minority influence. By holding constant rallies and producing educational pamphlets, they were able to create a **conflict** in the minds of majority group members, **drawing their attention** to the idea of votes for women. The suffragettes maintained their position over 15 years and were **consistent** in their arguments regardless of the attitudes of those around them. Their fight for the vote continued even when faced with imprisonment or death by hunger strike. As a result, majority group members were likely to take their views seriously and be affected by them because of the **augmentation principle**. Acceptance of the suffragette position was gradual, suggesting a '**snowball effect**' in political opinion.

Can social influence research be applied to other areas of social change?

Research into obedience to authority has also brought about social change in the workplace. For example, the findings from Hofling, et al's (1966) study of nurses raised awareness about the potential for senior staff to influence junior personnel to the point where they might break important

hospital rules. The education of doctors and nurses now includes courses in psychology. We would expect that this, along with the even more rigorous 'sign-off' procedures for administering drugs, should have changed practice for the better.



Remember that one way of explaining obedience is in terms of the 'foot-in-the-door'. Milgram believed that once people have agreed to a small request (e.g. taking part in an experiment) it is much easier to get them to agree to much larger requests (e.g. giving another person an electric shock). Although this has the potential to be mis-used, the foot-in-the-door could also be used constructively to bring about social change.

For example, if a local council made an initially large request of people to sort their recyclable rubbish into different kinds (e.g. cardboard, paper, glass, tins) many people would be reluctant to do this. However, if the council made an initially much smaller request of just asking people to put recyclable things into one bin, it could then later on make larger requests (e.g. to sort things) which people would find more difficult to refuse to do because they have already agreed to the smaller request.



The foot-in-the-door technique is a good way of bringing about social change

Social influence research has also changed what psychologists can do in their research studies. Before Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo conducted

their research, there were few constraints on the kind of studies psychologists could do. However, when procedures such as those used by Milgram became public, psychologists realised that they couldn't just treat people how they wanted to. As a result, there are now ethical guidelines and codes of conducts which psychologists have to adhere to in order to prevent unethical practices in psychological research.

Are evil things in society only done by evil people?

Psychological research on obedience has exposed the intellectual illusion that often hinders critical discussion about why people behave inhumanely, namely the belief that *only* evil people do evil acts. Both Milgram and Zimbardo shows that ordinary, decent people placed in powerful situations, either without adequate structural constraints or if they are put under pressure to obey an authority figure, may commit evil acts.

To reduce the likelihood of such behaviour, there is a need for *all of us* to be aware of the circumstances that lead, for example, to **blind obedience** or a failure to **empathise** with the plight of others. As recent events (e.g. in Iraq) have shown, we have a long way to go.

Empathy means knowing what something somebody is experiencing is like. For example, if you break your arm, I will feel sympathy for you, but I cannot empathise with you because I have never broken my own arm, so I don't know what it feels like. However, if you have to have a filling at the dentist's, then not only can I feel sympathy towards you but I can empathise with you as well, because I have been to the dentist's to have a filling myself.

There is a lot of research which shows that **increasing empathy** can change our behaviour. For example, Orlando (1973) showed that the experience of being in a mock psychiatric ward for only three days was sufficient for staff at a hospital to change their attitudes towards their patients and to put in place programs to enhance staff-patient relationships. Carers in positions of power need to empathise with those for whom they care if they are to treat them with respect.

As we have seen elsewhere, Milgram warned of the dangers of **blind obedience**, which is one of the reasons why he saw educating people (by having them watch the film he made of his studies) as important in helping to resist the demands made by others.

Zimbardo calls our capacity for evil the '**Lucifer Effect**'. He says that if you put people in certain situations without thinking about the consequences, they might behave in evil ways. But, Zimbardo says, we can't blame individuals themselves, but we can blame the *system* they are part of.