Majority & Minority Influence

Societal Meaning & Cognitive Elaboration

….the terms *Majority* and *Minority*

at least three ways to define these terms:

➤ the number of people in each group, with the majority group being numerically larger than the minority group

➤ reference to normative positions (opinions and beliefs that reflect "accepted" standards in society.)
  - ✓ In this sense, the majority typically holds the normative position
  - ✓ the minority the antinormative or deviant position

➤ We can refer to the power relationship between the source and recipient of influence (the ability of the source to exert influence over the recipient)

Majority
- the numerically larger group
- holds the normative position and has power over others.

Minority
- tend to be numerically small
- hold antinormative positions
- lack power over others

Research through four distinct phases

first phase **(pre-1970)** focused on how the majority was able to cause individuals to conform or comply with its position (Asch, 1952; Crutchfield, 1955)

➢ The second phase of research **(late 1960s to 1980)** reversed this question: focused on understanding the conditions under which a minority can influence the attitudes of the majority.

❖ **main research question of the first two phases of research:**

✓ the identification of the key factors that inhibit or facilitate majority or minority influence.

➢ third phase of research **(1980 to the present)** combined the first two phases and examined both majority and minority influence within the same paradigm

❖ **main research question of the third phase of research:**

✓ focused on the psychological processes underlying majority and minority influence and what impact they had on attitude change

➢ The fourth, and current, phase of research is a continuation of the third phase where the examination of majority and minority influence is undertaken through the application of theories and methodologies derived from the persuasion literature **(early 1990s to the present).**

❖ **The emphasis in this research has been:**

✓ to examine the different information processing strategies employed by recipients of either a majority or a minority persuasive message

✓ to detail the contingency factors that determine when they will be utilized

PHASE 1: EARLY RESEARCH ON MAJORITY INFLUENCE AND CONFORMITY (PRE-1970)

- The first studies of social influence examined the conditions under which an individual yields or conforms to a numerical majority (e.g., Asch, 1951; Crutchfield, 1955).
- These studies typically involved objective judgment tasks (such as judging the length of lines), and exposed participants to the erroneous responses of a numerical majority.
- The research question was, would naive participants agree with a majority of people who gave the obviously wrong judgment?
- Research has consistently shown that they do.
  - ❖ Explanations of conformity are based on the **functionalist perspective** of small-group behavior derived from work by
                                              Festinger (1950):

pressures for uniformity within groups to reach consensus, particularly when there is an explicit group goal, creating a **psychological dependency** of the individual on the group (i.e. individuals are dependent on others for social approval and verification of opinions and beliefs)

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) :

Distinction between two social influence processes underlying conformity: *normative social influence* ("an influence to conform with the positive expectations of others," p. 629) and *informational social influence* ("an influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality," p. 629).

PHASE 1: EARLY RESEARCH ON MAJORITY INFLUENCE AND CONFORMITY (PRE-1970)

➢ The focus of this first phase of research was on **how the majority influenced the individual,**

➢ and this neglected the possibility that the individual (or minority) could influence the majority.

➢ According to the **dependency account of conformity**, minorities lack the resources to make majority members dependent on them (such as, power, status, size) and therefore do not have the means to enforce normative or informational influence.

➢ Therefore, according to the conformity approach, <u>social influence can only flow from those who have the power to create psychological dependency</u> (such as a majority) to those who do not (such as a minority).

➢ **Deviancy,** within the functionalist approach, was seen as **dysfunctional** and a **threat** to group harmony;

➢ consequently, deviants either conform to the group or face rejection.

PHASE 2: EARLY RESEARCH ON MINORITY INFLUENCE AND INNOVATION (LATE 1960S TO 1980)

➢ ….history is replete with examples of individuals and minorities who have had a tremendous impact on the majority in

Society.

➢ It was this observation in the late 1960s by a French social psychologist, Serge Moscovici that led to a theoretical reshaping of the area. Moscovici argued that:

   ✓ if social influence only relied on conformity to the majority, then it would be difficult to see how groups changed, new ideas developed, and innovation might occur.

   ✓ there had been a "conformity bias" in the literature, with nearly all research focusing on majority influence,

   ✓ and that this had led to the dominance of the <u>functionalist approach</u> toward social influence, with its reliance on dependency as its explanatory variable (a <u>unilateral or asymmetrical perspective on social influence</u> that views influence as flowing only *from* the majority *to* the minority.

PHASE 2: EARLY RESEARCH ON MINORITY INFLUENCE AND INNOVATION (LATE 1960S TO 1980)

➢ All attempts at social influence create conflict between the source and the recipient of influence.

➢ Contrary to previous research that had only focused on the majority, Moscovici argued that minorities can, and often do, create conflict because they challenge the dominant majority view and,

➢ in so doing, offer a new and different perspective.

➢ Because people wish to avoid conflict, they will typically dismiss the minority position— often attributing its deviancy to an underlying, undesirable psychological dimension such as seeing the minority as "crazy," "provocative," or "unstable"

➢ **Behavioral style**: the *"way in which the behavior is organized and presented…to provoke the acceptance or rejection of a judgment…the fact that it maintains a well defined point of view and develops it in a coherent manner"*

PHASE 2: EARLY RESEARCH ON MINORITY INFLUENCE AND INNOVATION (LATE 1960S TO 1980)

➢ By standing up to the majority, the minority shows that it is <u>certain</u>, <u>confident</u>, and <u>committed</u> to its position
➢ **Two negotiating styles of influence** (Papastamou, 1979; Mugny, 1982)
   ✓ **a rigid style** where the minority refuses to compromise on any issue
   ✓ **a flexible style** where the minority is prepared to adapt to the majority position and accept certain compromises.

a minority that uses the flexible style is more likely than one that used the rigid style to influence the majority, especially on a direct level.

PHASE 2: EARLY RESEARCH ON MINORITY INFLUENCE AND INNOVATION (LATE 1960S TO 1980)

➢ Such a style of behavior creates two types of conflict within members of the majority:
- ✓ one **cognitive** (from an increase in response diversity)
- ✓ and the other **social** (from threatened interpersonal relations).

Because the majority is unable to discredit the minority, it resolves this conflict by questioning its own position and considering the minority's position as a valid

The "Genetic" Model : questioned the dominant functionalist account of influence that viewed social influence as invariably fl owing from those with power (majorities) to those without power (minorities), and instead showed that influence is a reciprocal, or dialectical, process

PHASE 3: COMPARING MAJORITY AND MINORITY INFLUENCE (MID-1970S TO 1990)

Conversion Theory Moscovici's (1980, 1985):

In the case of majority influence, individuals engage in a *comparison process* whereby they concentrate attention on "what others say, so as to fit in with their opinions or judgments" (1980, p. 214). Because people perceive that there are benefits from identification with a majority, they conform to the majority position without examining the content of the majority's message in detail.

Minority distinctiveness encourages a *validation process* leading one to "examine one's own responses, one's own judgments, in order to confirm and validate them...to see what the minority saw, to understand what it understood' (1980, p. 215).

Minority influence may not lead to public agreement, but because of concerns over being categorized as a (deviant) minority member (Mugny, 1982), the close examination of the minority's arguments may bring about attitude conversion on an indirect or private level.

Convergent–Divergent Theory (Nemeth, 1986; 1995)

exposure to a counterattitudinal majority breaks the consensus expectation and this leads people to narrow their focus of attention on the content of the majority's message. This is referred to as ***convergent thinking*** ("convergence of attention, thought, and the number of alternatives considered")

exposure to a counterattitudinal minority engage people in a wider range of issues, some of which may not have been proposed by the minority. Nemeth refers to this as ***divergent thinking*** ("a greater consideration of other alternatives, ones that were not proposed but would not have been considered without the influence of the minority"

Conflict-Elaboration Theory (Mugny, Butera, Sanchez-Mazas, & Perez, 1995; Perez & Mugny, 1996).
- ✓ divergence from a source of influence causes conflict; and how this conflict is handled depends on whether it originates from a majority or minority source.
- ✓ this approach considers conflict *elaboration*, a process that "refers to the way people give meaning to this divergence" (Mugny et al., 1995, p. 161).
- ✓ conflict-elaboration theory places a great deal of importance on the role of group identification in shaping psychological processes.
- ✓ The nature of the conflict elaboration and the types of influence depends on the type of task and the source introducing the divergence.

Two contingency variables are associated with the type of the task.
- ▪ The first concerns the *relevance of making an error*.
- ✓ If the task is objective with a clearly correct response (with all other responses being wrong), the cost to the individual of an error is high,
- ✓ whereas if the task is one where objectively correct responses cannot be determined, the cost of making an error is low.
- ▪ The second dimension concerns whether the responses are *socially anchoring*.
- ✓ If the response defines the individual within a particular group membership, it is socially anchoring,
- ✓ but if the response does not define an individual within a social category, the task is not socially anchoring.
- ✓ Crossing these two dimensions leads to four social situations, each of which is associated with different psychological processes involved in conflict elaboration.

Self-Categorization Theory (David and Turner 1996, 1999, 2001)
- only those who are similar to self (on dimensions relevant to influence) can be agents of influence,
- a minority will have influence only if it is defined as the target's in-group.
- The categorization of the minority as different from self reduces its influence.

The Context/Comparison Model Crano (Crano, 2001; Crano & Alvaro, 1998).
- If the message concerns *weak or unvested attitudes*, an ingroup minority can be persuasive because it is perceived by majority members as being distinctive, and this leads to message elaboration (in a similar way as proposed
- by conversion theory).
- If the minority is part of the in-group, it is unlikely to be derogated by the majority because the attitude dimension has little implication for in-group membership.
- Majorities, however, are unlikely to lead to much influence because the majority is not distinctive and therefore does not trigger message elaboration.
- If the message concerns *vested or central attitudes*, targets of ingroup minority influence are reluctant to be identified with the minority position, yet there is a reluctance to derogate other in-group members.
- **the "leniency contract,"** which allows the target to elaborate on the in-group minority's message without source derogation, "openmindedly, with little defensiveness or hostility" (Crano & Alvaro, 1998, p. 180),
- and this can lead to indirect attitude change.

PHASE 4: THE COGNITIVE-RESPONSE ERA (MID-1980S TO THE PRESENT)

application of concepts, and methodologies to the study of social influence that are derived from the cognitive-response approach to persuasion

This is an information-processing approach that focuses on how people's cognitions are affected by persuasive arguments, and how this affects the acceptance (or rejection) of these arguments.

The extent to which a message encourages people to generate thoughts that are consistent with that message determines whether they will be influenced by it.

In contrast, if a message leads people to generate thoughts counter to the message (or neutral ones or none at all), then attitudes will not be affected by the message.

The most notable development has been the application of the thought-listing method ology to examine people's cognitions.

This is now widely used in the majority and minority influence literature to assess cognitive activity, which is then used as a mediating variable between source status and influence.

the *objective-consensus approach* (Mackie, 1987; see also De Vries, De Dreu, Gordijn, & Shuurman, 1996).
In direct contradiction to conversion theory, this approach proposes that people are more likely to process a majority than a minority message.
Two reasons are given for this prediction;
 first, the majority exerts informational influence (people believe the majority view is valid and therefore
likely to process the arguments);
and, second the majority breaks consensus expectations (a counterattitudinal majority breaks expectations and this motivates people to analyze majority arguments to understand the discrepancy).
By contrast,
exposure to a counterattitudinal minority does not lead to informational influence, nor does it break the consensus heuristic and, consequently, one is less likely to process the minority's message.

the *source-position congruency model*. **Baker and Petty (1994)**
- ✓ According to this perspective, greater message processing occurs when the situation is "imbalanced" or unexpected (i.e., counterattitudinal majority or proattitudinal minority)
- ✓ than when the situation is "balanced' or expected (i.e., proattitudinal majority or counterattitudinal minority).
- ✓ When expectancies are violated, recipients of influence attempts are surprised and this motivates them to examine the source's message in more detail in order to resolve the inconsistency.

- ■ **Theories of that era draw on a parallel, first noted by Maass and Clark (1983), between Moscovici's concepts of comparison/validation and the nonsystematic/systematic processing strategies proposed in models of persuasion, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Wegner, 1999), and the Heuristic/Systematic Model (HSM; Chen & Chaiken, 1999).**