

Minority influence

Including reference to consistency, commitment and flexibility

Definition

Minority influence is a form of social influence where a small group or an individual changes the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours of a larger majority. Minority influence is most likely to lead to internalisation where both public behaviour and private beliefs are changed by the process.

Psychologists have identified different factors that can enhance the effectiveness of a minority, including consistency, commitment and flexibility.

Consistency – Minority influence is most effective if the minority keeps the same beliefs, both over time and between all the individuals that form the minority. It is effective because it draws attention to the minority view.

Consistency it can be synchronic; where individuals in the minority are all in agreement about the same thing, or diachronic; where the individuals have been saying the same thing for some time. Such consistency makes other people start to rethink their own views; this can lead to a change in opinion or behaviour. Wood et al (1994) carried out a meta-analysis of almost 100 similar studies to that of Moscovici and found that minorities who were seen as consistent held the most influence.

Commitment – Minority influence is more powerful if the minority demonstrates dedication to their cause, for example through personal sacrifice. This is effective because it shows the minority is not acting out of self-interest. Sometimes minorities engage in extreme activities to draw attention to their viewpoint. It is important that these activities pose some element of risk to the minority as this demonstrates commitment to the cause. Majority group members may then pay more attention to the opinions and behaviour of the minority; this is called the augmentation principle.

Flexibility – Relentless consistency could be counterproductive if it is seen by the majority as inflexible and unreasonable. Therefore, minority influence is more effective if the minority show flexibility by accepting the possibility of compromise. Nemeth (1986) argued that someone seen to be inflexible and dogmatic may not change the opinions of others. Instead, he argued that members of a minority need to be prepared to adapt their point of view and accept reasonable and valid counterarguments.

All three of the factors make people think about the view of the minority or its cause but it is suggested that deeper processing is needed to incur real change.

