

## How do Minorities influence Majorities? Critically examine with reference to relevant Theories.

There are a variety of factors that can influence how a minority group is able to influence a majority group. Although mostly studied separately, these factors are firmly related and all contribute towards the end result. *Consistency* can be seen as the most primary and uncontroversial factor influencing minority influence (Moscovici and Faucheux, 1972; see Gardikiotis, 2011; Kerr, 2002; Rashotte, 2006). Consistent minorities are perceived by others to be certain, confident and committed to their position, and are therefore more likely to persuade; conversely, erratic minorities may be perceived as unreliable and consequently be excluded (Gardikiotis, 2011). Other factors can be explained by Nemeth's (1986; see Gardikiotis, 2011) *cognitive-processing* theory of minority influence. Such factors include: activeness, authenticity, persuasiveness and strategy type (Nemeth, 2010; Kerr, 2002; Clark, 1998; Baron and Bellman, 2007; Gardikiotis, 2011). Other factors can be explained by Crano's (1998; see Gardikiotis, 2011) *socio-contextual* model of minority influence. Such factors include social categorisation and social status (Clark and Maass, 1988; Mucchi-Faina, 1994). Some factors are more general and contributory to the occurrence of minority influence, such as: gender, the size of the majority, the rate of majority defection to the minority, censorship, and the role of defection to the minority (Mori and Arai, 2010; Clark and Maass, 1990; Clark, 1990, 1994, 1998).

Minority influence can be defined as a process whereby a numerically smaller or perceived-to-be 'weaker' group manages to influence a larger group (Kerr, 2002; Gardikiotis, 2011). Minority groups are identified due to their deviation from the normative position (Moscovici, 1994; see Gardikiotis, 2011). Minority influence is a naturally occurring force that can sometimes lead to social change and ultimately allows the evolution of society (Moscovici, 1976; see Gardikiotis, 2011). Most theorists see minority influence as a helpful mechanism to improve majority group decisions, even if the minority view is not adopted (Nemeth, 2010; Crano and Seyranian, 2009).

*Conversion theory* (Moscovici, 1980, 1985; see Crano and Seyranian, 2009) was the first theory to explain how minorities influence majority's perceptions, attitudes and actions. Conversion theory asserts that when social conflict occurs; the 'target' (the receiver of influence) identifies either with the majority (comparison) to prevent ostracism, or with the minority (validation) due to curiosity. Ultimately they will either comply with the majority, or be converted by the minority. Comparison is shallow process used to fit in, whereas conversion represents a deep attitude change. This process has been shown to be far more complex than conversion theory assumes, with many factors contradicting its assertions (Crano and Seyranian, 2009; Gardikiotis, 2011). Despite this, its importance as a theory catalyst cannot be underestimated (Gardikiotis, 2011).

*Convergent-divergent theory* (Nemeth, 1986) is a 'style of thinking' theory; both majorities and minorities promote thinking, albeit different types: majority groups induce *convergent* thinking

(message-specific thinking), whereas minority groups induce *divergent* thinking (issue-specific thinking) (Nemeth, 2010; Gardikiotis, 2011). Issue-specific thinking involves thinking about something generally, where message-specific thinking involves adopting another's view at face value. Minorities are "active persuaders" (Nemeth, 2010, p.362). The dissent they cause "opens the mind" (p.362), leading to better decision-making and creativity. Nemeth argues that minority influence is vital in improving group output and preventing scenarios such as Groupthink (Nemeth, 2010).

*Context-comparison model* (Crano, 1998; Crano and Seyranian, 2007, 2009) is a 'conditions' theory; contextual variables are used as predictors of a minority's success. Gardikiotis (2011) summarises three main factors: whether the situation concerns attitude formation or change, the nature of the task, and the social identities of those involved. In situations of attitude formation, minorities, because of their distinctiveness and salience, capture the most attention, (Crano and Seyranian, 2009; Gardikiotis, 2011). In-group minorities possess the direct influential advantage over out-groups, due to their distinctiveness; this is even more powerful in objective tasks, where targets are influenced by others' sureness, and is assumed to be correct (Gardikiotis, 2011). Attitude change situations are more complex, because attitudes are embedded. On subjective tasks, the majority (the presumed in-group), possesses the influential power. Sometimes, targets of an in-group minority, despite agreeing with them, do not want to join that group, due to fear of majority group ostracism (Crano and Seyranian, 2009). Known as 'leniency-contract', this mechanism allows them to voice the minority position without challenging the majority view; indirectly, this can cause attitude change (Gardikiotis, 2011).

Convergent-divergent theory can be used to explain four factors that minority research has identified. Firstly, Kerr (2002) asserts that successful minorities must be *active* advocates of their cause. Kerr defined being an active minority member as being: aware of the relative popularity of their position, interdependent with others in their group, expectant to interact with others in the group thus revealing their opinion. Similarly, Nemeth refers to the "active" nature of minorities that enables "liberation" of different ideas and thoughts in the group (2010, p.362). Naturally, for minorities to persuade their targets, especially in attitude change tasks, an active nature is needed to convert them.

Nemeth (2010) identifies *authenticity* as a variable worthy of consideration. Authentic minorities are more successful influencing others, as well as promoting better decision-making and creative solutions (Nemeth, 2010). Nemeth cites applied occupational research that found that when 'pretend dissent' is used (e.g. role-play), less thinking occurs and sometimes convergent thoughts in the majority are *strengthened* (Nemeth, et al., 2001). Motivation of the minority group is most likely related to this; if the issue is relatable and embodies a strong attitude, they would be more likely to find various arguments to defend it. Conversely, a group weakly motivated by the subject will not be taken seriously, as their commitment to the cause will not be present (Gardikiotis, 2011).

*Persuasiveness* is another factor identified, furthering the role of consistency (Baron and Bellman, 2007). Known as *courage hypothesis*, Baron and Bellman propose that persistent (consistent) minorities will be positively perceived by appearing sincere, confident and courageous by risking social ostracism. They have shown in their research that harassed minorities are more persuasive than un-harassed minorities. Therefore, in difficult situations, the minority's positive traits can materialize which can have a positive effect on their cause. Convergent-divergent theory can further this claim; presumably, when targets see minorities being harassed, this *could* invoke pro-social behaviours, such as sympathy and understanding, thus making convergent thoughts less likely due to disillusionment.

*Strategy-type* is another important factor mediating a minority's success (Moscovici and Faucheux, 1972). Rigid minorities are more likely to be uncompromising and can therefore be easily seen as extreme and discounted more readily. Adaptive flexibility that is sensitive to the needs of the context is ideal in helping minorities to succeed (Gardikiotis, 2011). According to convergent-divergent theory, minority views promote better decisions even if that view is not used. However, a minority that portrays an idea forcefully may push the group away from making divergent decisions and reinforce the convergent idea, similar to 'pretend authenticity' (Nemeth et al., 2001).

Context-comparison model can be used to explain two key conditional changes in social situations. *Social categorisation* is a differentiation between in-group members (members of one's social category) and out-group members (members outside of one's social category); research has found that these different groups influence the potential power of minorities (Clark and Maass, 1988; Volpato et al., 1990; Mucchi-Faina, 1994). Social categorisation is one of context-comparison model's predictors of minority influence, which has been firmly supported by subsequent research (Crano and Seyranian, 2009). In-groups possess more direct influence, whereas out-groups, although less likely to succeed, will persuade with indirect influence.

*Social status* refers to the authority a sub-group possesses. Some research investigating social categorisation has similarly looked at source status (Volpato et al., 1990; Mucchi-Faina, 1994). Mucchi-Faina found that minority status interacts with targets' attitudes. High-status in-groups directly caused compliance, whereas low status in-groups caused divergence, and low-status out-groups indirectly caused conversion (which was less likely). As context-comparison predicts, social categorisation and status have been shown to be firmly related to our attitudes of others (Crano and Seyranian, 2009).

*Censorship* (Clark, 1994) is an indirect, albeit contextual factor that may be explainable by both theories. Clark found that when 2/3 of the minority message was censored, their influence became more powerful. Context-comparison model predicts task type variability will change the outcome,

whereas convergent-divergent theory predicts divergent thoughts will change the outcome. Therefore, more complex tasks will require more comprehensive views, and a censored minority will prompt others to try and understand the minority position. Likewise, convergent-divergent theory may explain this as censorship promoting divergence due to disillusionment.

Other factors are relevant in considering minority influence. For example, gender differences have been found, with female minorities tending to conform more than males (Mori and Arai, 2010). Regardless of whether this is environmentally or biologically stimulated, it demonstrates the complexity of social influence. Other research has shown that as the majority increases, minority influence decreases (Clark and Maass, 1990). Similarly, when minorities are able to refute majority arguments and seek social support from others, their influence increases; this may be explanatory of the way majorities develop in the first place (Clark, 1990, 1998).

Convergent-divergent theory is supported by considerable empirical evidence and has been applied in various occupational and legal contexts (Nemeth, 2010; Gardikiotis, 2011). Martin and Hewstone (1999) found that when the minority group was able to input ideas as to how to solve two physically different (yet structurally similar) problems, creativity (analogous problem-solving) from the majority was much more likely. This study also cites other research finding that dissenting minorities promote creativity and better judgements (Nemeth and Kwan, 1985). Other research shows the differential message/issue thinking process being used by participants (Butera et al., 1996). Volpato et al. (1990) found that when in-group minority's views were rejected by the majority, this stimulated new, alternative ideas. Nemeth (2010) also cites supportive evidence; where individuals are placed in minority roles, divergent thinking becomes more common (Levine and Russo, 1995). Additionally, those with less power (minorities) consult multiple sources of information compared with more powerful individuals who focus on one target (Guinote, 2008).

Context-comparison model has received similar levels of empirical evidence as convergent-divergent theory, with research supporting its predictions. Clark and Maass (1988) found that in-group minorities were perceived as being more credible and were more influential than out-groups, presumably because of the closer social bond. Additionally, there was a disparity between what participants claimed to support in public compared to what they privately for the in-group minority. Out-group minority views reinforced these views. Most importantly, greater credibility was associated with greater attitude change, supporting context-comparison theory's assertions of attitude formation/change and social identity. Mucchi-Faina (1994) found similar supportive results; in-group, high-status minorities had greater direct influence over others than out-groups. Volpato et al. (1990) found that group categorisation affected their influence potential. Context-comparison has been described by Gardikiotis as "...a synthesis of very influential social psychological traditions" (p.687), combining both the information-processing and social identity approaches to produce a more comprehensive theory of minority influence. By considering cognitive factors (attitude

formation/change), social factors (social identity) alongside contextual factors (task-type), this theory is able to directly account for a wide variety of factors mediating minority influence, not *just* the cognitive factors, which is the case for convergent-divergent theory.

Both convergent-divergent theory and context-comparison model's research findings have been successfully applied into occupational, legal, political, conflict and community settings (Nemeth, 2010; Crano and Seyranian, 2009). This is an important strength; by using their approaches to provide insight into the workings of minority influence, group activity outcomes can be enhanced by including certain conditions. Using convergent-divergent theory's rationale, for example, can facilitate the decision-making process by including minorities wherever possible, so companies can make better quality decisions (Nemeth, 2010). Peterson et al. (1995; see Nemeth, 2010) investigated seven 'Fortune 500' management teams and found the most successful teams encouraged dissent in private meetings. As Nemeth notes, the theory's framework is robust in well replicated in field settings (2010), with better group results occurring generally alongside minority influence. Therefore, genuine disagreements are beneficial, whereas superficial devil's advocate exercises can be detrimental (Nemeth, 2010).

Both theories are well-equipped to explain minority influence phenomena (Gardikiotis, 2011). However, cognitive and socio-contextual factors are not mutually exclusive; they are interdependent. Both theories can be used to understand the wide range of factors that can mediate the success of minorities in social situations. Where convergent-divergent theory focuses primarily on cognition (thoughts and attitudes), context-comparison model, despite referring to attitudes, is more focused on situational changes that can complicate the outcome. Convergent-divergent theory is more *explanatory* of group processes, whereas context-comparison model is more *predictive* of where and when minority influence will occur. Some factors still remain unexplained by these theories, such as gender, defection, and majority size. A revised model of predicting minority influence should consider the wide range of variables that have been uncovered (Crano and Seyranian, 2009). That both theories have been applied successfully though demonstrates their validity as realistic interpretations of minority influence outcomes and effects (Gardikiotis, 2011; Crano and Seyranian, 2009).

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