Lesson Seven	# Minority Influence and Social Change

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- look at explanations of defiance of authority

- understand how the minority can influence the majority

- explore the role of social influence processes in social change

- examine and discuss methods use in social influence research

Context

It is possible to resist the demands of an authority or not to conform, although it is not necessarily easy. After we have considered this and minority influence, we look at how the theories of social influence that we have already considered have implications for individuals, groups and nations the whole world over.

Lawton & Willard: *AQA A-level Psychology Book 1*, pp. 41-49.

Oxford Open Learning

Changing Majority Views through Minority Influence

The experiments of Asch and Sherif clearly demonstrate the power of the *majority* norm to influence the behaviour of individuals and minorities. But is it possible for this relationship to be reversed? In other words, can individuals or minorities influence the behaviour of the majority?

Clearly, the answer must be yes, otherwise majority norms could never change and yet they do. Examples of majority norms changing are to be found in all walks of life. In the world of science, Darwin's theory that humans evolved from lower animals changed the majority view that humans were created by God in his own image, and Darwin's view is now the majority norm. The same could be said for Freud's theory of the influence of the unconscious mind on human behaviour or Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The same applies with the rise and fall of political ideologies (for example Marxism) or in the worlds of fashion and music. For example, consider the influence of rock groups like the Beatles on hairstyles and popular taste in music.

However, it is clearly much harder for an individual or minority to change the majority norm, than vice-versa. Essentially, it is a form of persuasion or attitude change. We are usually looking at a single person or a single group influencing the masses.

An example might be a few suffragettes winning rights for women, or Nelson Mandela changing world views on racial inequalities. Or, Osama Bin Laden, a leader of terrorists at the start of the 21st century attempting to change the world by violence for what he believed to be the better, but most of the world believed to be for worse.

Another more mundane example you will be familiar with is Band Aid's Christmas single "Do they know it's Christmas?" In 1984 a small band of musicians got together to raise awareness of the famine relief in Ethiopia, with Bob Geldof and Midge Ure as it key message providers. It sold a million copies in its first week and raised £8 million for the cause and was influential in persuading citizens in the UK to go on supporting overseas aid for the next thirty years.

Clearly, minorities do have influence and can manipulate change.

In the 1950's **Hovland** identified four major factors influencing the effectiveness of the minority:

1. Consistency
2. Flexibility
3. Relevance
4. Commitment.

Let us examine each of these in turn. Your specification mentions consistency, flexibility and commitment as special criteria.

Consistency

The minority must be consistent in their opposition to the majority view. This means the message must be clear and remain the same, no matter who speaks it.

There are two types of consistency –

A) **Diachronic** – the message stays the same over time

B) **Synchronic** – consistency between members

If the minority is not consistent, it serves to reinforce the beliefs and behaviours of the majority, the exact opposite of its intentions. On the other hand, if the message is consistent in what is said and over time, it will gradually infiltrate the majority. It is like a slow-release drug, where the effect builds up over time.

Note that the arguments and conclusions reached in the following study are similar to ideas we met in conformity except that in this case, Moscovici says a minority will cause the majority to have a *complete change of mind*. They **internalize** the new viewpoint and will behave in accordance with the minority view in the future.

The fact that this theory and the forthcoming study share a common background theory only gives it greater credibility as a scientific study. You may want to refer back to conformity and Asch's line study and group size, as effectively that is still about the minority vs the majority. His original study was how the majority influenced the minority, of course.

Study: Moscovici et al. (1969) Blue-Green Study of consistency

Aim: To see if a minority could influence the majority when choosing between different colours of slides.

Procedure: Participants were given eye tests to check whether they were colour blind. Then they were placed in a group consisting of four participants and two confederates. They were shown 36 slides which were clearly different shades of blue and asked to state the colour of each slide out loud. In the first part of the experiment the two confederates answered green for each of the 36 slides. They were totally consistent in their responses. In the second part of the experiment they answered green 24 times and blue 12 times. In this case they were inconsistent in their answers. Would the responses of the two confederates influence those of the four participants? In other words, would there be minority influence?

Results: When the accomplices were consistent the other

participants conformed and called the slides green on 8.42% of the trials, with 32% of the participants calling a slide green at least once. When the accomplices were inconsistent, conformity reduced to 1.25%.

Conclusion: Minorities are able to influence a majority, but not all the time and only if they show consistent behaviour.

Evaluation: Only just over one third of people conformed, at best, therefore two thirds did not conform to the minority view at any time. The significant difference lies in the comparison of those who did change their mind, but as this was just such a small proportion of those who took part in the study, we must be careful not to extrapolate too much from this study and try and generalise to the public at large.

This study was a laboratory experiment, and the task was not representative of something we would expect to do, or indeed have any interest in.

Moscovici only used female students which means he might have obtained different results if he had used men and women, so it would be wrong to generalize his results to all people – they only tell us about the behaviour of female students.

Flexibility

The minority listen to the views of others and are not dogmatic. Listening to others makes them feel respected and their opinions valued. It is not always necessary to change your message but it is necessary to let others know you have taken on board their considerations in making your decision. If the minority listens, it means the majority has to reply and to engage with the arguments being put forward. The more debate and discussion, the more opportunities to influence the majority.

Relevance

The minority's views must be perceived as being in line with social trends or in line with the majority group's behaviours. Your argument must also reflect the opinions and behaviours of those whose minds you are trying to change.

Commitment

The minority are seen as being truly committed to their views, leading the majority to re-think their standpoint and convert to (i.e. **to identify** rather than comply with) the minority view.

In addition to these features, other ideas have been put forward …

Status and Credibility

Regarding the source (i.e. who is trying to do the influencing), studies have shown that an important factor is their status and

credibility. If the source is perceived to be an expert, then the more likely they are to be influential. If the viewpoint appears to be their own, and they have the information in their head and can 'ad lib' freely as opposed to reading off notes, then the minority person will be even more persuasive. It they hesitate over the information they are providing they lose credibility and influence (**Hovland and Weiss**, 1951).

Personality

Individuals who are charming, humorous and pleasant in their manner, both in their verbal behaviour and body language, are more influential (**Baron and Byrne**, 1991). They draw attention to themselves, especially if they are a charismatic person. The memory of the person will have a longer lasting effect than the thousands of word that they spoke at the conference.

Fear Arousal

Regarding the nature of the message, there is evidence that one factor in persuasive communication is the degree of fear involved (**Janis and Feshbach**, 1953). This principle is often employed in campaigns against drink-driving or drug use, for example.

Another factor is the degree to which the message is clearly and logically spelled out or left implicit (**McGuire** 1968).

For instance, over the last twenty years, the minority view of climate change has gradually won over the majority. One element of this is that the topic creates fear about what the future holds and therefore it holds our attention. With repeated exposure over the years, and with increasing knowledge (informational social influence) the general public has changed its views and now most people accept climate change exists, whereas in the 70's and 80's the scientists were just lone voices trying to attract the attention of the masses.

Level of Education

Regarding the recipients (or the people who are to be influenced), the important factor is their level of education. Generally speaking, better educated people are more likely to be influenced by two-sided argument (**Hovland et al**, 1949).

Group Discussions

The context or situation in which the communication takes place will also affect how influential it is. Generally speaking, informal situations such as group discussions are more influential than formal situations such as speeches or lectures.

It has been suggested that **social impact theory** can be used to explain all types of social influence. Social influence depends upon:

- the **strength** of the influence – such as the number of people;

- the **status** of the influence – for example, whether those exerting pressure are experts;

- the **immediacy** of the influence – the closer you are to those exerting pressure the more influence they have on your behavior.

The role of social influence in social change

Social change occurs when a society or nation as a whole adopts a new perspective.

We have referred to various changes that have occurred in society over the years throughout this lesson, and seen how one person or a small minority group of people can have major influence, e.g. in politics and religion, sometimes affecting every single person in the world. Minority influence is hugely important and without it, changes in society would be slower and less adaptive.

Go back 2000 years to when a bunch of fisherman met a guy who called himself Jesus Christ. They formed a little group and these hell-raisers went out about preaching a completely different way of life, and Christianity still flourishes all these years later.

Interestingly, though the centuries Christianity has at times been the majority group, not just a practising minority group as some say it is in the UK today. **So minorities and majorities fluctuate**.

Activity 1	Can you think of people who have spoken out against commonly held views? Have they managed to change the view of the majority? If so, how did they do it?

For minorities to be successful in society we have seen they must be consistent. By advocating a strong and consistent message and presenting it in an organized way, perhaps in a rally, or holding conferences all around the country, they break the mould and start to change the norms of society. They make us aware that there are alternatives. We don't have to agree with them, and there is no telling that we ever will, but each time we hear the message, we

have to think about it and weigh it up against our existing beliefs. We begin to change through informational social influence.

If, as an individual we change our mind to that of the minority, we tend to seek others who share that view, which reinforces our new view. Then as we talk to others we start to change other people's views in the process. Eventually, if all conditions come together, the minority view becomes the majority view, using a mix of informational and normative social influence. This is called the **snowball effect** (Van Avermaet, 1996). We saw how that came about in the British Prison Study (Haslam & Reicher, 2012)

The **implications of social influence** are both **positive** and **negative**. We all agree that our world is precious and that we must maintain it, and minorities show us every day what we as individual, nations and countries can do about it.

Every time you see a wildlife programme on TV telling you about e.g. the demise of white rhinos, you are seeing and listening to a minority view attempting to change the majority view through informational social influence, using a whole range of techniques. It creates awareness and interest and often will encourage you to dip into your pocket to support a charity or an organisation. So, that is how social influence can affect us positively. It can help us to know how we can improve our world.

Activity 2	Watch a short except from a nature programme on TV. Look through Hovland's criteria and note just how many of them are being used in practice to educate and inform, and to subtly change your point of view.

Throughout this module, we have seen social influence in a rather negative light, showing that it be used for evil ends.

The world today is only too well aware of terrorism, a word that was rarely used before the 90's. Of course, atrocities occurred before then and have occurred throughout time on the basis of minority interests, be they religious or political or about inequality, but it has changed its nature in recent years.

Thirty years ago terrorism would have been acts of violence by (minority) groups of people with a group name, trying to change the majority's opinions. They would have acted as a unit.

But more and more individuals are becoming terrorists – for a cause – and willing to die for what they believe in. Single terrorists within a large named group are becoming a 'normal' part of the way of life. You will most likely never have heard of them until some kind of disaster strikes.

They are successful from a psychological perspective because they are consistent, they never give up, they are absolutely committed to their cause and believe it wholeheartedly, and they are persistent. They also make sure that attention is paid to them by their events being publicized, and by videos and recordings. They are autonomous and individuals choose to become a terrorist (by and large) without coercion. There is an element of fear because of the terror they create. This whole paragraph has referred back to theory we have looked at, so you can see, that as a minority they are exceedingly powerful, beyond what you might expect.

However, they do not fulfil all the criteria as they are not flexible, and we don't hear a lot about their message. They are *obedient* to their cause and have internalized the ethos of that group but are not interested in other people's messages.

There are plenty of other examples throughout history.

Implications of studies of social influence: Maze Prison and Robben Island

Maze Prison

The British Prison Study raised a lot of questions and the researchers applied their research to issues that have occurred in history. One of the main criticisms is that prisoners do not manage to take over prisons.

Well, they did manage to do this, in the Maze Prison, in Northern IrelandThere was a long-running argument between the UK and Irish Republicans, and to cut a long story short, by 1975 nearly 2000 prisoners were interred there, mostly Catholics. 'Interred' means that they are imprisoned without trial. They were suspected of being involved in paramilitary activities. At the time, they were given "Special Category Status", so that they didn't wear uniforms, they were allowed food parcels and extra visits.

Figure 1: Maze Prison with its familiar H-blocks

Remember when we criticized the Zimbardo study and the repeat study by Burger et al, we said that if the relationship between the authority and the lower status group was respectful, compliance and obedience was greater. Indeed, this was the case, and the two groups rubbed along together fairly amiably until the British government removed their special status and refused to accept their position as political prisoners.

Not only did this unite the prisoners as they formed a protest group but the publicity promoted their cause and spurred on Catholics who were outside the prison to support them. From just a few people it soon became a mass protest.

They became dissenters and defiant. At this point, the guards changed their behaviour and became brutal, bullying and terrorizing the prisoners. In the words of one prisoner "The screws had power, and like the bullies they are, they abused it to the full" (Campbell et al, 1994, pp 9-10).

The prisoners' revolt took flame and they showed their displeasure in a variety of obscene ways, such as smearing excrement over the walls. The key point though, was that their unity was empowering them with a new sense of purpose. A clear leadership emerged within the group, and initially the authorities decided to put all the leaders in the same block before they realized what a mistake that was, and then they split them up. But this was not before two significant events had occurred.

There were two **hunger strikes** in 1980-1 to put pressure on the government to recognize their political status. It initially appeared to work, but the government changed its mind again on certain concessions which instigated the second hunger strike. Nine prisoners died. This was broadcast nationally, and everyone in the UK came to know of its leader, Bobby Sands.

The hunger strikes are remembered today as a very powerful symbol of unity and solidarity by a minority, with an influence to change the mind and mood of the majority.

In essence, the conclusion was a stalemate, but nonetheless it changed the power relationships in prisons. The prisoners

started to be able to manipulate the guards, and they grew in confidence. This eventually led to a momentous event.

In September 1983, the prisoners organized the largest escape of prisoners from a UK prison. 38 managed to escape.

How did they do it? By using guile and their wits to outwit the guards and by calling themselves "prisoners of war" they were empowered. Over a period of time they worked on conditioning the guards, so that they had little control and effectively the prisoners were calling the shots.

This created a change in power dynamics, which led on to changes in government policy. The prisoners were eventually released in the Good Friday Agreement, and the Northern Irelanders were given a referendum.

So much was achieved by so few, purely because their privileges were taken away from them.

Robben Island, South Africa (1962-1991)

Robben Island was a place where the South African government placed those convicted of crimes against Apartheid. Apartheid was the government policy of segregating blacks from whites, and denigrating and abusing black people.

About 750 political prisoners were held on Robben Island, and they were brutally treated. As we have learnt from the studies, to consistently treat people badly does not kill their spirits as intended but inflames them. As everyone was treated in the same way, the minority worked together and their determination and confidence grew.

Nelson Mandela in later life

Leaders emerged, one such inmate being Nelson Mandela. Later, when they were released, they were instrumental in the downfall of Apartheid. Not only had they come from nothing to run the prison, they now ran the country!

One comment that was made was that the social support given to each other was a major factor in the development of the group.

They shared their understanding of what was going on, and they gained strength from each other.

They were also educated within the confines of the prison, and although treated brutally by the guards, they had opportunities to develop mentally, to prepare them for their ultimate protest.

Comment: when we looked at the factors for resistance, one factor was the level of education. Higher levels of education give privileges and create confidence, and we see this here in Robben Island.

Sobibor Extermination Camp (1942-43)

We started by discussing the Nazis' hatred of the Jews in the first lesson and we return to it now to complete this section.

It was initially thought that the Jews did not resist extermination during WW2 and went meekly to their deaths. Over time, this has been found to be far from the truth. There were 90 ghettos with armed undergrounds and resistance actually occurred within the camps themselves.

Jewish women at forced labor pulling hopper cars of quarried stones

The Nazis were aware that prisoners in cramped conditions might unite and create a minority group as we have already seen. They attempted to set different groups of people against each other, as a 'divide and rule' policy. Some were reprieved if they conformed to the roles they gave them to keep order. They became the guards instead of the Nazis. As accomplices this alters the power dynamics. Doesn't this sound like the Zimbardo study, only this time it is real, with real implications?

A group of 80 Russian Jews entered the prison. They already knew each other, and had a group identity. They had a good organized structure that worked. As a group, they all shared the norms and values of the Soviet Army. In a way, they were a little army in themselves. Their leading man was Perchersky, a strong and charismatic man, and his reputation quickly spread around the camp. He used reverse psychology with the guards, refusing treats and favours, and completing tasks in double-quick time which confounded them.

This intelligent group worked out a plan to escape. They would persuade guards to go to a position out of sight and kill them. At the afternoon roll call, the arms store would be seized and the remaining SS guards would be shot. They would then be able to escape.

They attempted to put their plan into action on October 14, 1943. The first stage of killing guards was successful but they were rumbled at the afternoon roll call, the guards opened fire and many were killed. Out of 600 prisoners, 300 escaped, but only 50 were alive at the end of the war.

This shows that even in the most repressive regime imaginable, resistance is possible. The rules of social influence, conformity, obedience and minority influence were major factors in the success of all these rearguard actions at one point or other.

Activity 3	Take a look through your local newspaper on have a look online at the main newspapers such as the *Times, Telegraph* etc. See if you can find an example of a minority, individual or group, influencing the majority. If you are clever, you will be able to use this information in an exam question!

Ethical and Methodological Issues in Studying Social Influence

Much of the social influence studies we have looked at were conducted at a time when psychologists were not as sensitive to ethical issues. We often impose our current standards on an earlier time and are critical of their behaviour. It wasn't until 1993 that the British Psychological Society completed the first national guidelines describing how research should be carried out ethically.

The four main **ethical** issues that arise with social influence research are:

- Deception

- Informed consent

- Protection of physical or psychological harm to participants

- Right to withdraw

The main **methodological** issues arising from research into social influence, especially those studies that use laboratory experiments, are:

- **Ecological validity**

  This is whether or not the study has been affected by where it was carried out and the manner in which it was carried out. A laboratory study is very artificial by its very nature, whereas a field study is carried out in a natural environment so it has high ecological validity. A case study is usually even better (other things being equal).

- **Demand characteristics**

  People often like to try to guess what the experiment that they are taking part in is *actually* about. This can contribute to a bias in their answers.

- **Participants**

  Choosing the right type of sample or having enough people in your sample to make valid decisions about your results are important considerations. For instance, in the Moscovici study, there were 4 participants and 2 confederates. For this to be really valid, this would need to be repeated many times over. Another factor is whether the participants are similar to the general public. Hard to tell, I know, but it can be a factor as often people who take part in experiments have the same sort of personality.

We have seen laboratory studies, field studies and real life observations (case studies) in this module. Each has its strengths and limitations. There is no such thing as the 'perfect study', and you must always remain alert to other possible interpretations of the results and be critical in both positive and negative ways of all studies.

We will keep coming back to methodological issues as they crop up again and again.

Activity 4	Choose one study of either conformity, compliance, obedience, or minority influence. State which method was used for the study and name one positive and negative aspect of that method in relation to that study. (Method refers to whether the study was an experiment, a field study, an observation or a case study.)
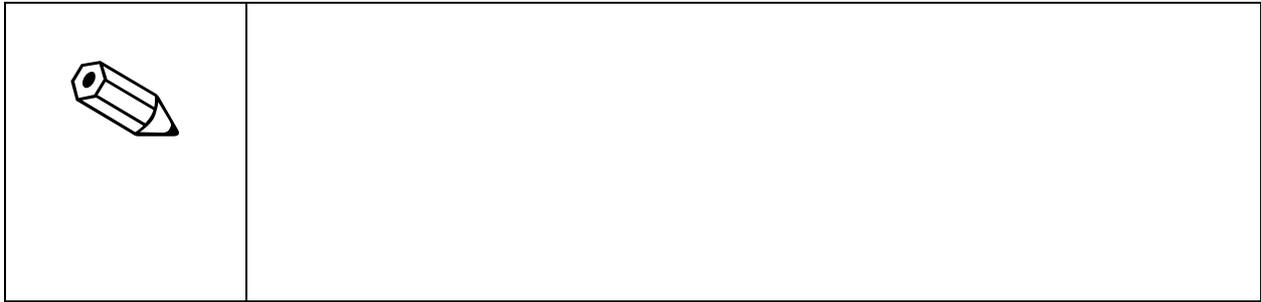
Using your book make detailed notes on the ethical and methodological issues in the key studies of Zimbardo and Milgram.

Also when you are writing about studies, *always* write some evaluation of an ethical or methodological issue. You can expect to read this message at various points in this course because it is so important.

Now read Lawton & Willard: *AQA A-level Psychology Book 1,* pp. 41-49.

Practice Test

1) What is meant by 'minority influence'?

2) Name Hovland's four key factors in minority influence.

3) Which of these has the strongest influence in your opinion?

4) Describe two other factors that dictate whether a single person or group might be able to successfully influence a majority.

5) What is the 'snowball effect'?

6) How did Moscovici's study provide evidence that minorities can change the view of the majority?

7) Describe one real life example of how social influence has had a positive effect in the community.

8) Explain how a group norm may develop

9) How might social support benefit the minority? Think of the prison studies to help you answer this question

10) What do the prison studies tell us about social influence?

Suggested Answers to Activities

Activity 1

Examples might be:

Miner's strike – Arthur Scargill
Women's Liberation – Germaine Greer
Against Communism – Aleksandr Solzhenistsyn, Andrei Sakharov
Familiar Names: Nelson Mandela, Muhatma Gandhi

Activity 2 and 3

Sample answers cannot be provided for these as they were practical assignments for you to carry out.

Activity 4

Here are a few ideas, but it is certainly not an exhaustive list.

Asch: Conformity Experiment. Artificial setting, even in the positioning of the participant at the end of the line. This would not happen in reality, therefore it does not have ecological validity. A positive aspect of this study is that it had 'construct 'validity. That is, that it did what it was designed to do. Its simplicity meant that conformity (or not) would clearly be shown.

Zimbardo: Social Roles. A quasi-experiment. 'Quasi' in this context means a 'mock-up'. They were trying their best to recreate a prison environment, which is very commendable and leads to greater authenticity. It is questionable whether it has ecological validity because even so, the participants were not actual guards or prisoners.

Freedman & Fraser: Compliance. This was a field experiment, which means that it was an experiment carried out in a natural environment. This gives it high ecological validity and allows naturally occurring confounding variables to have a place in the experiment, so this does represent real life more than in a laboratory. The negative aspect to this experiment is that it is known that a certain type of person likes to complete telephone surveys. It meant that anyone who hung up or didn't have a telephone could not be included.

Haslam & Reicher: reporting on prison studies. These were all case studies. That means they were natural occurring events that people happened to monitor. These are extremely high in ecological validity as all the comments and behaviours actually happened. The negative side of a case study is that it is down to the researcher as to what is recorded and how it is interpreted. It can be very subjective.

Milgram: laboratory experiment. This was highly controlled by the experimenter. It was well designed so that the results could be clearly analyzed using numerical data. It had high validity as an experiment on obedience as, in real life, someone who is obedient is giving his

power to someone else, so an experiment is quite appropriate in this context. On the negative side, was it absolutely necessary to use 'shock' tactics to find out how far we will obey an order? Going to extremes such as Milgram did creates another artificiality which people may see through. In any case, being a laboratory experiment, all the participants would guess that no harm would be allowed to come to anyone.