Social Influence

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Social influence is defined as change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that results from interaction with another individual or a group. Social influence is distinct from conformity, power, and authority. Conformity occurs when an individual *expresses* a particular opinion or behavior in order to fit in to a given situation or to meet the expectations of a given other, though he does not necessarily hold that opinion or believe that the behavior is appropriate. Power is the ability to *force or coerce* someone to behave in a particular way by controlling her outcomes. Authority is power that is believed to be *legitimate* (rather than coercive) by those who are subjected to it.

Social influence, however, is the process by which individuals make *real* changes to their feelings and behaviors as a result of interaction with others who are perceived to be similar, desirable, or expert. People adjust their beliefs with respect to others to whom they feel similar in accordance with psychological principles such as balance. Individuals are also influenced by the majority: when a large portion of an individual's referent social group holds a particular attitude, it is likely that the individual will adopt it as well. Additionally, individuals may change an opinion under the influence of another who is perceived to be an expert in the matter at hand.

French and Raven (1959) provided an early formalization of the concept of social influence in their discussion of the bases of social power. For French and Raven, agents of change included not just individuals and groups, but also norms and roles. They viewed social influence as the outcome of the exertion of social power from one of five bases: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, expert power, or referent power. A change in *reported* opinion or attitude (conformity) was considered an instance of social influence whether or not it represented a true private change.

French and Raven's original research was concerned with situations in which a supervisor influences a worker in a work situation. Subsequent scholarship has examined a wide variety of other social interactions, including families, classrooms, doctors and their patients, salespeople and customers, political figures, and dating couples. Work settings also continue to be a prominent topic for studies of social influence.

Since 1959, scholars have distinguished true social influence from forced public acceptance and from changes based on reward or coercive power. Social researchers are still concerned with public compliance, reward power, and coercive power, but those concerns are differentiated from social influence studies. Current research on social influence generally uses experimental methodology and tends to fall into five main areas: (1) minority influence in group settings, (2) research on persuasion, (3) dynamic social impact theory, (4) a structural approach to social influence, and (5) social influence in expectation states theory. Each is discussed below.

Minority influence is said to occur when a minority subgroup attempts to change the majority. For example, teachers often influence their students' beliefs, and political and religious leaders frequently influence the behavior of their followers. While some previous research has characterized the process of social influence as the majority riding roughshod over the minority, many scholars interested in minority influence believe that every member of a group can influence others, at least to some degree. Studies have found this to be particularly true when the minority group is consistent in what it presents to the majority.

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In addition, the presence of minority groups within a larger group often leads to more creative thinking and better overall solutions on group tasks. Nemeth and Kwan (1987) demonstrated this in a study of four-person groups working on a creativity task. Individuals were given information that a majority (3 of 3) or a minority (1 of 3) of the other group members had come up with a novel response to the task at hand. Those who were in the minority condition actually produced more correct solutions to the task, indicating the strong effect of minority viewpoints.

Current research on persuasion, broadly defined as change in attitudes or beliefs based on information received from others, focuses on written or spoken messages sent from source to recipient. This research operates on the assumption that individuals process messages carefully whenever they are motivated and able to do so. Two types of theories dominate modern persuasion research: the elaboration likelihood model and heuristic-systemic models.

The elaboration likelihood model developed by Cacioppo, Petty, and Stoltenberg (1985) has been used most frequently (and very effectively) in therapeutic and counseling settings. It states that the amount and nature of thinking that a person does about a message will affect the kind of persuasion that the message produces. Aspects of the persuasion situation that have been shown to be important for this model include source, message, recipient, affect, channel, and context. Of particular importance is the degree to which the recipient views the message's issue as relevant to himself. This model has demonstrated its utility in persuading various people to make various types of healthier choices (e.g., cancer patients, those at risk from HIV/AIDS, teens at risk from tobacco use, etc.).

Heuristic–systemic models propose that argument strength will be most effective in persuading an individual when she is motivated and able to attend to the message (the "systemic" route). When the target individual is not motivated or is unable to attend carefully, persuasion will take place through more indirect means (the "heuristic" route), such as nonverbal cues or source credibility. Persuasion that takes place via the systemic route will be relatively permanent and enduring; persuasion through the heuristic route is more likely to be temporary.

Broader than persuasion, social impact theory, as developed primarily by Bibb Latane (1981), forms the basis for an active line of inquiry today called dynamic social impact theory. Social impact means any of the number of changes that might occur in an individual (physiological, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral) due to the presence or action of others, who are real, imagined, or implied. Social impact theory proposes that the impact of any information source is a function of three factors: the number of others who make up that source, their immediacy (i.e., closeness), and their strength (i.e., salience or power). Impact also may be attenuated by impediments to the operation of any of the three factors.

Dynamic social impact theory (Latane 1996) uses these ideas about social impact to describe and predict the diffusion of beliefs through social systems. In this view, social structure is the result of individuals influencing each other in a dynamic and iterative way. The likelihood of being influenced by someone nearby, rather than far away, (the *immediacy* factor noted above) produces localized cultures of beliefs within communication networks. This process can lead initially randomly distributed attitudes and beliefs to become clustered or correlated; less popular beliefs become consolidated into minority subcultures. Dynamic social impact theory views society as a self-organizing complex system in which individuals interact and impact each others' beliefs.

Like dynamic social impact theory, the structural approach to social influence examines interpersonal influence that occurs within a larger network of influences. In this larger network, attitudes and opinions of individuals are reflections of the attitudes and opinions of their referent others. Interpersonal influence is seen as a basis of individuals' socialization and identity. Social influence is seen as the process by which a group of actors will weigh and then integrate the opinions of significant others within the context of social structural constraints. The structure determines the initial positions of group members and the network and weight of interpersonal influences within the group.

Social influence network theory, as described by Friedkin (1998), has its roots in work by social psychologists and mathematicians, including French. The formal theory involves a two-stage

weighted averaging of influential opinions. Actors start out with their own initial opinions on some matter. At each stage, then, actors form a "norm" opinion which is a weighted average of the other opinions in the group. Actors then modify their own opinion in response to this norm, forming a new opinion which is a weighted average of their initial opinion and the network norm. This theory utilizes mathematical models and quantifications to measure the process of social influence.

Expectation states theory provides another formal treatment of social influence. Rooted in the work of Bales (1950), which found inequalities in the amount of influence group members had over one another, researchers in this tradition have developed systematic models predicting the relative influence of task-oriented actors in group settings. Bales discovered that even when group members were equal on status at the beginning of the group session, some members would end up being more influential than others. The group would develop a hierarchy based on the behavior of the group members. When group members were initially unequal in status, inequalities would be imported to the group from the larger society such that, for example, age or sex or race would structure a hierarchy of influence.

Expectation states theory, as described in Berger et al. (1980), was originally proposed as an explanation for Bales's finding that groups of status equals would develop inequalities in influence. According to the theory, group members develop expectations about the future task performance of all group members, including themselves. Once developed, these expectations guide the group interaction. In fact, expectations both guide and are maintained by the interaction. Those group members for whom the highest expectations are held will be the most influential in the group's interactions.

Research in the expectation states tradition has developed into a burgeoning area within sociological social psychology. Scholars are continuing to expand the theory both theoretically and substantively. On the theoretical side, developments include the status characteristics branch, work on status creation, ideas about status interventions, and many others. More substantive or applied work has been conducted using expectation states approaches to social influence in settings such as classrooms, jury rooms, and the workplace. Status characteristics that produce influence have been identified and extensively studied, including sex, race, sexual orientation, and physical attractiveness.

Future work will need to integrate these approaches of minority influence, persuasion, social impact, the structure of social influence, and expectation states. While each approach has produced worthwhile knowledge thus far, a general model of social influence will need to incorporate group structures, the characteristics of the individuals in those structures, and the distribution of characteristics into majority and minority components.

SEE ALSO: Asch Experiments; Authority and Conformity; Expectation States Theory; Interpersonal Relationships; Reference Groups

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