

The Social Impact of Majorities and Minorities

Bibb Latané
Ohio State University

Sharon Wolf
Morehead State University

Previous theorizing about social influence processes has led to the emergence of two research traditions, each focusing on only a subset of influence situations. Research on conformity looks at the influence of the majority on a passive minority, whereas research on innovation considers the influence of active minorities on a silent majority. In the present article, we review these two lines of research, as well as some recent evidence, from the perspective of a new theory of social impact. This theory views social influence as resulting from forces operating in a social force field and proposes that influence by either a majority or a minority will be a multiplicative function of the strength, immediacy, and number of its members. Social impact theory offers a general model of social influence processes that integrates previous theoretical formulations and empirical findings and accounts for the reciprocal influence of majorities and minorities. By viewing social influence as a unitary concept, social impact theory permits comparisons between conformity and innovation and predicts the relative magnitude of their effects.

Traditional approaches to social influence have concentrated almost exclusively on situations in which the majority serves as the source of influence pressure (Allen, 1965; Darley & Darley, 1976; Kiesler & Kiesler, 1969). Considering dependence to be the process by which influence operates, researchers have sought to identify those variables that increase the dependence of individuals and minorities upon the majority. Thus, the majority's size, status, and power have been systematically investigated. In the context of research on conformity, the minority has been viewed as the passive recipient of forces emanating from the majority.

Recent research on innovation (Levine,

1980; Moscovici, 1976; Moscovici & Nemeth, 1974) suggests that individuals and active minorities can serve as sources of influence pressure. When the minority is viewed as a source, rather than as a target, it is clear that traditional models of social influence must be modified. A minority, by definition, is disadvantaged in terms of those characteristics—size, status, and power—that would make a majority dependent upon it. Turning away from dependence, Moscovici has argued that behavioral style is the mechanism by which influence operates, particularly when the influence source is a relatively powerless minority. In the context of research on innovation, the majority has been viewed as the passive recipient of forces emanating from the minority.

Moscovici's challenge to traditional conceptions has led to a rift in our theorizing about social influence processes. Two distinct research traditions have emerged, each offering a different view as to what constitutes a crucial independent variable, an appropriate dependent variable (Moscovici, 1980), and indeed a valid understanding of the process by which social influence operates. Although Moscovici (1976, p. 68) has suggested that both the majority and the minority can be simultaneously the source and target of social influence, this possibility has not been investigated. Our purpose in

Preparation of this article was supported by National Science Foundation Grant BNS-7619629 to the first author. Portions of this article were presented at the International Symposium on Social Influence Processes, Laboratoire Européen de Psychologie Sociale, Barcelona, Spain, September 1980; at the annual meeting of the Kentucky Academy of Science, Lexington, November 1980; and at the annual convention of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Detroit, Michigan, April 1981. Vernon Allen, Jack Brehm, Sharon Brehm, Timothy Brock, John Darley, James Davis, John Harvey, John Herstein, Jeffrey Jackson, Norbert Kerr, Serge Moscovici, Charlan Nemeth, Anthony Pratkanis, John Pryor, Richard Sorrentino, and Maryla Zaleska provided valuable comments on an earlier draft.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Bibb Latané, Behavioral Sciences Laboratory, 404B W. 17th Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43210.

the present article will be to explore its implications.

By considering the simultaneous and mutual influence of majorities and minorities, social impact theory (Latané, 1981) would seem to provide a means of bridging the theoretical gap that has been created and integrating the findings of both research traditions. This theory proposes that social influence can be understood as resulting from social forces operating in a social force field. The amount of influence produced by either a majority or a minority will be a multiplicative function of the strength, immediacy, and number of its members.

Our plan in the present article will be to review briefly a traditional dependence model of majority influence and Moscovici's model of minority influence. Then the principles of social impact theory will be presented and their application to an understanding of social influence will be specified. Findings of previous research and of some recent research will be evaluated from the perspective of this theory. Finally, we will argue for the theoretical advantages of viewing social influence as a unitary concept.

Two Models of Social Influence

Majority Influence

Throughout the literature on majority influence, researchers have considered dependence to be the process by which conformity operates (Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972). In general, it has been shown that the greater an individual's dependence upon another individual or group, the more he will conform to that individual's position or to the group's norms. Jones and Gerard (1967) identify two types of dependence. Information dependence exists when an individual relies upon others for information about the environment or its meaning. Effect dependence exists when an individual relies upon others for the direct satisfaction of needs. This is similar to Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) distinction between informational and normative influence.

By virtue of its superior size, a majority would seem to be better able to satisfy both of these dependence needs than would a

minority. The greater the number of individuals who espouse a position, the better basis they provide for establishing social reality (Festinger, 1954). Further, the greater the number of people advocating a position, the greater are their resources for rewarding those who conform to that position and punishing those who deviate. Supporting the increased effectiveness of larger numbers is the finding that conformity to the majority position increases with increases in majority size, at least up to three, where conformity appears to reach an asymptote (Asch, 1951).

Since majorities are seldom in a position of dependence upon the minority, it is not surprising that research in this tradition has considered the majority as the source and the minority as the target of influence pressure. In fact, most of this research has employed trained or simulated confederates as the majority and naive subjects as the minority. Minority influence has not been a potential consequence of the influence process in this research. From the perspective of dependence models, it would be difficult to account for influence produced by a numerically disadvantaged minority.

Minority Influence

As Moscovici and his colleagues point out, minorities are not always the passive recipients of influence pressure. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that even non-elite minorities (those lacking special expertise or power) can be successful in modifying majority norms (Allen, 1975; Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969; Nemeth, Swedlund, & Kanki, 1974; Wolf, 1979). Dependence would not appear to be the mechanism underlying such effects.

According to Moscovici's position, behavioral style—"the orchestration and patterning" (Moscovici & Nemeth, 1974, p. 220) of behaviors—is the source of influence pressure. One style is consistency, the repetition of a response or system of responses by an individual over time. A consistent behavioral style demonstrates that the influence agent is confident and committed to his position and that he is unwilling to compromise with respect to it. These attributional conse-

quences of consistent behavior mediate influence.

The effectiveness of consistency as a source of influence pressure is not determined by dependence relations, and thus it is a particularly potent source of influence when the influence agent is a minority. Moscovici and Faucheux (1972, p. 158) claim that if dependence relations are not salient, the number of individuals involved in an interaction should not directly affect the amount of influence exerted. According to this model, the minority's numerical disadvantage does not preclude it from exercising influence. In fact, the minority's smaller size may indirectly increase the influence it exerts by fostering attributions of confidence and commitment.

Moscovici and Faucheux (1972, pp. 179–180) have argued that the “testimony of a single subject who is performe more consistent with himself is more influential than the testimony of a theoretically less consistent subgroup.” Increasing the size of a minority beyond one almost inevitably implies a reduction in consistency and consequently in influence. Likewise, Nemeth, Wachtler, and Endicott (1977) suggest that a minority has two stylistic advantages inversely related to its size. By standing out against the crowd, the minority gains visibility and becomes the focus of attention in the group. As minority size increases, the majority's attention becomes divided, and individual minority members become less salient. Second, by advocating its position consistently in the face of possible sanctions, the minority forces the attribution that it is confident and committed to its position. As minority size increases, the potential for ostracism and rejection is reduced, resulting in a decrease in perceived confidence and commitment and consequently in influence.

In light of the hypothesized advantage of smaller numbers, it is not surprising that research in this tradition has considered the minority as the source and the majority as the target of influence pressure. In fact, this research has typically employed trained or simulated confederates as the minority and naive subjects as the majority. Majority influence has not been a potential outcome of the influence process in this research. From the perspective of Moscovici's model, it is

difficult to account for majority influence and particularly for increases in influence with increases in the number of influence sources.

Summary

The apparent conclusion of research in these two traditions is that majority and minority influence require different explanatory frameworks. Minorities are inherently disadvantaged with respect to the variables hypothesized to mediate majority influence—size, status, and power. Majorities are at a disadvantage with respect to the process hypothesized to mediate minority influence—perceptions of confidence and commitment created by a consistent behavioral style. Two models of social influence have been proposed, neither of which can account easily for influence by both factions.

There would appear to be theoretical advantages of viewing social influence as a unitary concept. A general model of social influence processes, by viewing majority and minority influence as potential outcomes of a single process mediated by a common set of variables, would offer a more parsimonious account of influence data covering a greater variety of influence situations (cf. Doms, Note 1). Social impact theory (Latané, 1981) attempts to provide such a perspective.

Social Impact Theory

Social impact may be defined as any of the great variety of changes that occur in an individual as a result of the real, implied, or imagined presence of other individuals. Social impact theory describes these effects in terms of social force fields analogous in some respects to the physical force fields that govern the transmission of light, sound, gravity, and so forth.

Social Forces: $I = f(SIN)$

As an example of a social force field, Latané (1981) describes Figure 1 in terms of the impact of several sources on an individual target. He identifies three factors that determine the combined effect of the sources on the target: the strength (*S*) or intensity

(status, power, ability, etc.) of the source persons (represented by the areas of the circles), their immediacy (I) or proximity in space or time to the target, and the number (N) of source persons present.

Thus, the social impact experienced by a target person should be a multiplicative function of these three factors, with I (impact) = $f(SIN)$, suggesting that the effect of any one variable will be greater the greater the value of the other variables. As any one of these variables increases, there should be a corresponding increase in impact.

Marginal Impact: $I = sN^t$

As in the case of physical stimuli, the psychological effect of other people may not be a simple linear function of their number or strength. Rather, social impact may obey psychosocial laws similar to the psychophysical laws that govern the subjective impact of physical stimuli such as light and sound intensity (Stevens, 1975). Social impact theory proposes that the effect on a target person of an increase in the number of sources will be a power function, with each additional source producing less impact than the previous source. This principle of marginally decreasing impact can be expressed by the equation $I = sN^t$, where s is a scaling constant reflecting the impact of a single

person in the specific situation and t is an exponent with a value of less than one. That the value of the exponent must be less than one implies that impact will grow as some root of the number of source persons.

Latané (1981) describes 10 diverse areas of application of social impact theory including the interest value of news events, social inhibition of response to emergencies and requests for help, tipping in restaurants, inquiring for Christ, group productivity, and crowding in rats. With its few basic propositions, it is clearly a broad theory applicable to a wide range of social phenomena, which integrates and formalizes ideas developed by psychologists working in such disparate areas as Kurt Lewin in group dynamics and S. S. Stevens in psychophysics. It does, however, lead to highly specific and verifiable predictions. Here we illustrate its application to social influence phenomena.

The Social Influence Situation

Majority Influence

When influence pressure is generated by a unanimous majority, all of the social forces acting on an individual target will pull him in the same direction. Social impact theory proposes that conformity pressure will increase with increases in the strength, immediacy, and number of individuals advocating the majority position. Further, as the number of majority members increases, their impact on the target person should grow as some root of N , with the largest differences in conformity being associated with the first few increments in N .

Asch and the magic number three. This situation is precisely that of the subject in a typical Asch (1951, 1952, 1956) experiment. Asch brought together groups of students for the ostensible purpose of making a series of perceptual judgments. Their task was relatively easy—to choose from among three lines the line that was equal in length to a standard. Students did this alone, or after 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, or 16 other people (actually experimental confederates) had first responded. When alone, the students were virtually errorless in their judgments. When judging in groups, however, they were faced

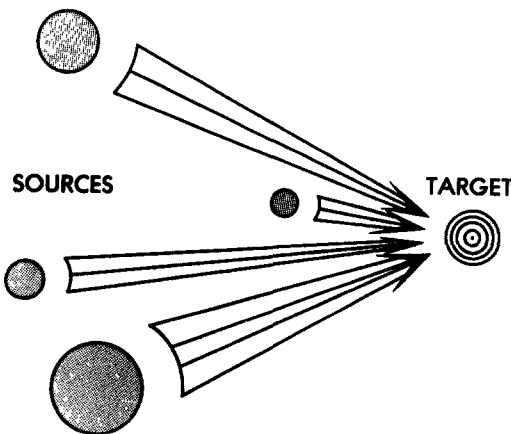


Figure 1. Multiplication of impact: $I = f(SIN)$. (Figure from "Psychology of Social Impact" by Bibb Latané, *American Psychologist*, 1981, 36, 343-356. Copyright 1981 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.)

with a difficult conflict: On one third of the trials, the other judges unanimously reported an obviously incorrect response. The students were thus forced to choose between stating a judgment that contradicted the physical evidence or one that contradicted the reported evidence of the other judges. Asch set up a conflict between the physical impact of the stimulus situation and the social impact of from 1 to 16 other people.

Overall, Asch found that the students conformed to the erroneous judgments of the majority on about one third of the critical trials. The amount of conformity, further, depended upon the size of the incorrect majority (Figure 2, a). When the majority consisted of but one or two individuals, there was very little conformity. With the addition of a third majority member, conformity increased dramatically. Increases in majority size beyond three, however, did not result in increasing amounts of conformity.

Asch's explanation of his data focused on the Gestalt notion of group consensus: Conformity results from the perception of agreement among group members and not from the mere addition of their individual influences. Once this perception has been created, further increases in majority size should have little effect. It appears that at least

three individuals are necessary for the majority to be perceived as consensual.

Social impact theory predicts a clearly different relationship between majority size and conformity from the one suggested by Asch's interpretation of his data. The failure to find increases in conformity when majority increases in size beyond three poses only a small problem for the theory. The principle of marginally decreasing impact implies that the conformity curve should level off, although perhaps not quite so completely. More problematic for social impact theory is that majorities of one and two had so little effect on conformity. One should always expect the first person in a social force field to have the greatest impact. It may be that Asch's college students were sufficiently independent, at least with respect to the evidence of their own senses, to require a substantial amount of social pressure just to bring them up to a yielding threshold. The impact of the first two confederates, then, might have been in reducing restraints against making incorrect judgments.

The missing magic number. Asch's (1951, 1952, 1956) research has led to a number of attempted replications, the results of which have tended to confuse rather than clarify the relationship between majority

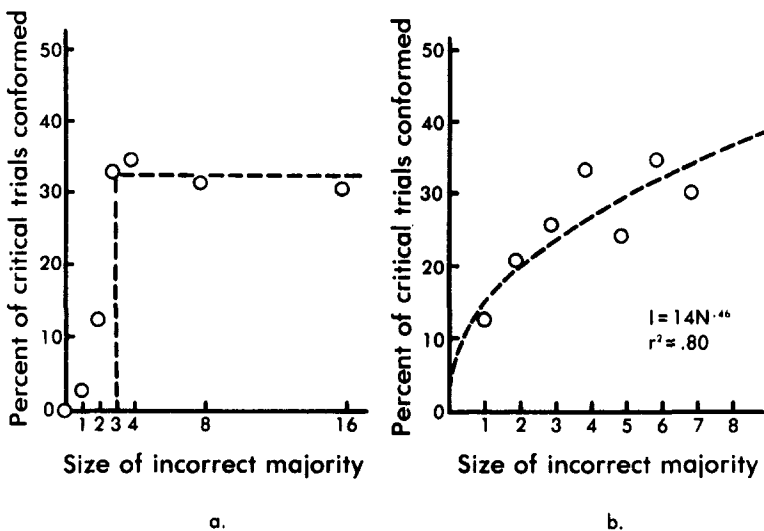


Figure 2. Conformity as a function of number (N) of majority members: (a) data from Asch (1951); (b) data from Gerard, Wilhelmly, & Conolley (1968). (I = impact.)

size and conformity (Goldberg, 1954; Kidd, 1958; Rosenberg, 1961). The failure to find a clear relationship arises in part because these replications have inadequately sampled the range of group sizes or run an insufficient number of subjects to get stable estimates. One exception is a well-executed study by Gerard, Wilhelmy, and Conolley (1968). Gerard et al. attempted to replicate Asch's findings with younger subjects, who presumably had less confidence in their perceptual abilities and required less social pressure to overcome their resistance to making counterfactual judgments. They exposed 154 high school students to the erroneous judgments of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7 confederates. In contrast to Asch, they found that conformity continued to increase as majority size increased beyond three, with a simple linear trend accounting for 61% of the variance in means. More importantly, the first few confederates had the greatest impact. In fact, a power function does even better than a straight line in fitting their data, accounting for 80% of the variance. This best fitting power function, calculated from the formula $I = sN^r$ (illustrated in Figure 2, b by the dashed line), finds that conformity equals $14N^{.46}$, implying that a single confederate induced conformity on 14% of the trials. As predicted, the exponent is less than one and shows that conformity grew as the square root of majority size.

Social influence by signature. To provide further evidence on the role of majority size, Latané and Davis (Note 2) conducted a field experiment in which college students were approached at various Ohio State University campus locations and asked to sign a four-page questionnaire concerning the adequacy of local newspapers. Each page had one question at the top and two columns labeled "Yes" and "No" below, with spaces for 40 people to sign their names in each column. The questions concerned the adequacy of foreign and national news coverage, state and local news coverage, sports coverage, and columns and features. Respondents were asked to sign their name on each page in the column that best reflected their opinion.

The questionnaires already contained a varying number of signatures at the time they were distributed. These signatures were

carefully arranged so that 1, 2, 3, 6, or 12 signatures appeared in one column and none in the other, and they were counterbalanced so that they appeared on the "Yes" and "No" sides of each issue an equal number of times. In order to establish a baseline, conditions were included in which there were no signatures in either column, or one or six signatures in each. Since the Ohio State campus is very pleasant in springtime and many people walk or sit outside with nothing much else to do, 1,008 people agreed to complete the forms, for a total of 4,032 responses.

Overall, this procedure elicited a high degree of conformity. Considering all of the cases in which there was a unanimous majority, 68% of the respondents adopted the majority position. Since 50% would have done so even in the absence of the previous signatures (the majority signatures appeared on each side of the issue equally often), we can infer that 18% of all respondents were led to conform, or 36% of those who would normally have expressed the opposite opinion from that espoused by the majority. The presence of only one previous signature led 20% of the individuals initially opposed to the majority position to conform. Thus, this procedure elicited conformity of the same order of magnitude as that reported by Asch.

The amount of conformity further depended upon the size of the unanimous majority (Figure 3). Conformity increased systematically with the number of signatures up to a majority of 12, and the first signature on the questionnaire had more effect than any of the subsequent signatures. Although there may be some slight elevation in conformity with a consensus of three, the prevailing characteristic of the data is their regular, monotonic, negatively accelerated increase. The power function $I = 24N^{.38}$ does a good job of describing the relationship between majority size and conformity, accounting for 88% of the variance. Conformity on a questionnaire seems to grow as the cube root of the number of majority signatures.

The degree of conformity elicited by this procedure is somewhat surprising considering that the majority was represented only by the signatures of strangers—people who

were not even present at the time of influence. On the other hand, the issues involved value judgments rather than matters of physical reality, and thus the respondents' opinions might have been more susceptible to change. We might also note the existence of consistent sex differences in conformity (Wolf & Latané, 1981). Persons with female names were more influenced (42%) than persons with male names (30%). There were also sex differences with regard to specific issues—both sexes had similar views with respect to the adequacy of foreign and national, and state and local, news coverage; but females were much more satisfied with the number of columns and features and, not too surprisingly, with the adequacy of sports coverage. However, these differences in original attitude did not affect conformity, and sex did not interact with the majority size effect.

The results of this study, coupled with those from Gerard et al. (1968), challenge Asch's conclusion that conformity is essentially unrelated to majority size both by their demonstration of systematic increases in conformity with increases in majority size beyond three and by the significant amounts of conformity obtained with majorities of one and two. More precisely, they suggest that conformity is related to majority size by a power function, with each additional

majority member producing a smaller increment in conformity than the previous member. Taken together, they provide strong support for a social impact theory analysis of the majority influence process.

Minority Influence

In the situations just described, the social forces acting on the target were unidirectional, each influence source contributing to the total pressure on the target to adopt the majority position. In other social situations, when influence sources are not unanimous with respect to the positions they advocate, the forces impinging on the target may pull him in different directions. Consider, for example, the situation of an individual who is the target of influence by others who are divided on the issue in question. The force exerted by the larger faction will pull the target toward the majority position, whereas the force of the smaller faction will pull the target toward the minority. According to social impact theory, the magnitude of each force will be a multiplicative function of the strength, immediacy, and number of subgroup members; and the resultant force on the target will be a simple function of the difference in impact imparted by each. All else being equal, conformity to the majority position should increase as a power function

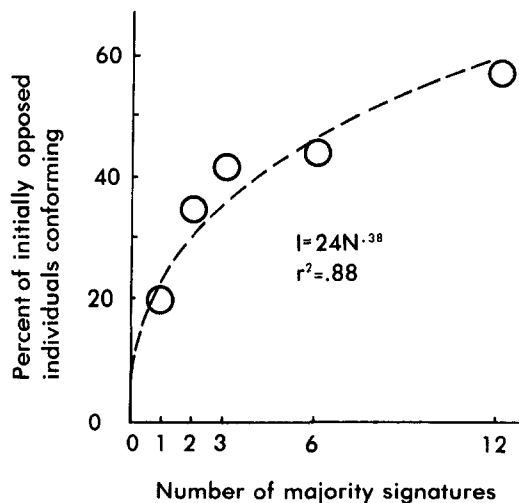


Figure 3. Conformity on a questionnaire as a function of number (N) of majority signatures. (I = impact. Figure from Latané & Davis, Note 2.)

of majority size and decrease as a power function of minority size.

Asch and the magic number one. In addition to his research with unanimous majorities, Asch (1952) conducted several studies of minority dissent. In the first study, he simply introduced a "partner" who responded correctly on the critical trials. The presence of the partner reduced conformity from 33% to 13%. Asch suggested two factors that might operate when a dissenter is present: (a) presence of social support or (b) lack of consensus. If social support were the critical factor, the dissenter would have to agree with the subject, but if breaking consensus were the important factor, the dissenter could be even more incorrect than the majority. To help choose between these factors, Asch introduced dissenters who either answered between the majority estimate and the correct response or who were even more extremely incorrect than the majority. In both cases, conformity was greatly reduced, although not eliminated.

From these results, Asch concluded that the breaking of consensus was the major factor responsible for conformity reduction in the presence of a dissenter. Asch essentially views the group as a dynamic whole, the majority and the minority being part of the total configuration. Consensus is a property of the group as an entity, and once it is broken, additional minority members should cause no further decrease in conformity. This general conclusion has received only partial support from the study by Allen and Levine (1969) and from the studies reviewed by Allen (1975).

Rather than viewing the group as a whole, social impact theory views the majority and the minority as separate sources of influence. Holding majority size constant, increases in the size of an opposing minority should result in decreasing amounts of conformity to the majority position, with the largest decrements in conformity being associated with the introduction of the first few minority members.

The missing magic number. Only one study in the minority influence tradition has investigated parametric variations in minority size. Nemeth, Wachtler, and Endicott (1977) brought six naive individuals to-

gether with one, two, three, or four confederates to make a series of perceptual judgments. Their task was to indicate the color of slides, all of which were objectively blue. The confederates unanimously labeled each slide as "blue-green." The results showed that the number of "blue-green" responses given by the naive participants was significantly higher in all four experimental conditions than in a control condition composed entirely of naive people. A minority of three was found to be significantly more influential than minorities of one or two, but a minority of four did not differ significantly from the others. Although Nemeth et al. report that the only significant component of the minority size effect was linear, our reanalysis of their data shows that a power function with an exponent of .5 achieves a slightly better fit.

Unfortunately, a methodological feature of this experiment makes it impossible to obtain a precise estimate of the minority size effect. All of the responses were made publicly, and each time a naive participant conformed to the minority position, the majority to minority size ratio changed. In a group of six naive participants and four confederates, for example, the first person to agree with the minority position obscures the majority-minority distinction. The value of their conclusions with respect to minority size, therefore, is limited.

Minorities make a minor impression. A more precise investigation of the effect of minority size was conducted by Davis and Latané (Note 3) in the context of a study on social influence and person perception. Employing a procedure used in the study of impression formation, they asked participants to integrate information from several sources in order to form a coherent impression of another person. Each of up to 24 different persons who knew the target person gave a one-word trait description, either positive or negative, and participants were asked to report how much they would expect to like the person described on a scale from -100 to +100. Each respondent rated 216 different target persons described by from 0 to 24 different people, with a combination of 0 to 12 extremely positive and 0 to 12 extremely negative adjectives listed on a sin-

gle page. Thirty-six positive and 36 negative trait adjectives selected from a prescaled list were arranged so that each of the 36 possible combinations of 0, 1, 2, 4, 8, and 12 positive and 0, 1, 2, 4, 8, and 12 negative descriptions occurred six times in random order.

Overall, participants tended to be slightly favorable toward the target persons, even when they had no information about them. As expected, their initial impression was substantially affected by the information they were given, becoming more favorable the more people gave positive descriptions and less favorable the more people gave negative descriptions. The positive and negative descriptions were equally influential, although their effects were in opposite directions.

Considering those cases in which people gave either all positive or all negative descriptions, the change in favorability ratings from a no-influence baseline increased systematically with the number of trait descriptions. Additionally, the first few descriptions had the greatest impact (Figure 4). The power function $I = 22N^{.49}$ accounts for an impressive 99% of the variance in means, implying that the first person giving a description had an average effect of 22 percentage points and that impact grew as the square root of the number of people giving descriptions.

In those cases in which participants were exposed to both positive and negative influences at the same time, it appears as if they simply subtracted the lesser influence from the greater to form their resultant impression. More precisely, Figure 5 shows that when the number of negative descriptions was held constant, an increase in the number of people giving positive descriptions led to very regular increases in the favorability of the final impression. Further, the increase in the elevation of the curves appears to level off with the addition of the fourth positive person, suggesting that the first few positive descriptions had the greatest impact. Similarly, holding the number of positive descriptions constant, an increase in the number of people giving negative descriptions led to systematic decreases in the favorability of the impression. The figure shows that each increment in the number of negative descrip-

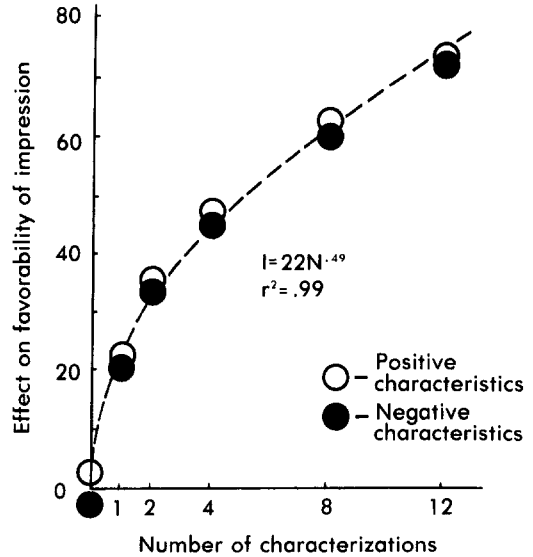


Figure 4. Change in favorability of impression as a function of number (N) of unanimous descriptions. (I = impact. Figure from Davis & Latané, Note 3.)

tions results in a slightly lower parallel curve and further, that the distance between the curves grows smaller with increasing numbers of negative descriptions. As in the case of the positive descriptions, then, the first few people giving negative descriptions had the greatest impact. Although some of the 36 data points deviate from the best fitting power functions, these deviations do not appear to be systematic and probably represent random variability. The data do show that whereas majorities make a major impression, minorities have a minor but noticeable impact.

The results of these last two studies suggest that minority influence is a positive, although negatively accelerated, function of minority size. Holding majority size constant, increases in the size of an opposing minority appear to result in decreasing amounts of conformity to the majority position, with the largest decrements in conformity being associated with the introduction of the first few minority members.

Multiplication Versus Division of Impact

In the situations considered so far, the target individual has been presumed to hold no

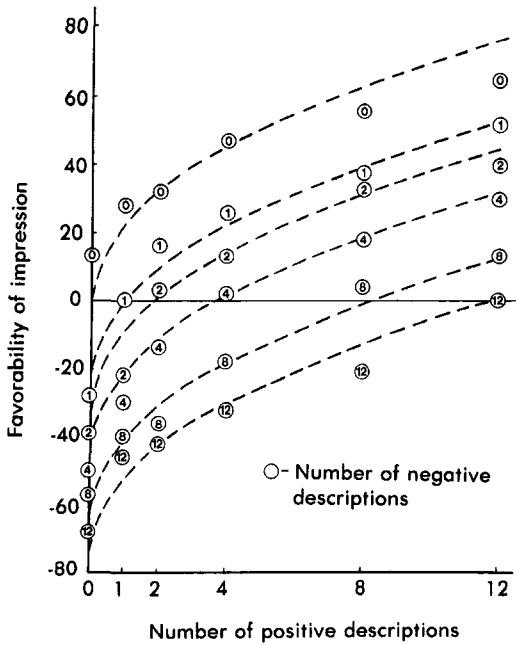


Figure 5. Favorability of impression as a function of number of positive and negative descriptions. (Davis & Latané, Note 3.)

initial attitude on the issue in question (i.e., has been a member of neither the majority nor the minority). There is another way to view the social influence situation, and that is to assume that this individual is a member of either the majority or the minority and is the target of forces coming from the other faction.

Social impact theory defines two types of social situations that result in different kinds of social force fields. In the first situation, an individual is the target of social forces emanating from other people. It has been proposed that the impact he experiences will be a multiplicative function of the number of people present and the amount of impact generated by each. In the experimental situations described, the subject has been presumed to be in such a multiplicative force field.

In the second situation, an individual stands with others as the target of a social force coming from outside the group. He is in a different kind of force field, as illustrated in Figure 6. In this situation, impact will be diffused or divided among the group

members, with each individual feeling less impact than he would if he were alone. As the strength, immediacy, or number of other group members increases, the impact of an external source on any individual will decrease, so that in this case, $I = f(1/SIN)$. As in the case of a multiplicative force field, the relationship between the number of people in the group and the resultant impact on an individual group member should be a power function, with each additional group member producing a smaller decrease in impact than the previous one. In this case $I = sN^{-1}$, reflecting the divisive nature of the force field.

It may be noted that both types of force fields may be operative in a given situation. For example, an individual may be a member of one group that is the target of forces coming from another group. In this situation, the impact experienced by that individual should be a direct function of the strength, immediacy, and number of people in the opposing group and an inverse function of the strength, immediacy, and number of people in his own group; that is, $I = f(SIN \text{ opposing group} / SIN \text{ own group})$.

Thus, if we assume an initial attitude on the part of an individual target consistent with that of either the majority or the minority, this individual will be in both a mul-

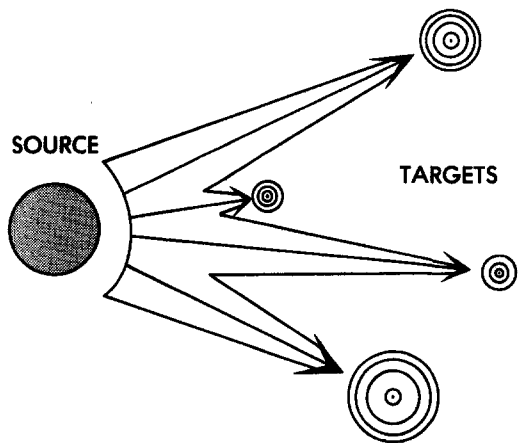


Figure 6. Division of impact: $I = f(1/SIN)$. (Figure from "Psychology of Social Impact" by Bibb Latané, *American Psychologist*, 1981, 36, 343-356. Copyright 1981 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.)

tiplicative and a divisive force field. This suggests that he will be affected by others in his own subgroup, as well as by those in the other subgroup, and that each subgroup will have an effect upon the other. From this perspective, majority and minority influence may be viewed as simultaneous and reciprocal.

A General Model of Social Influence

A general model of social influence processes may be described by the social force field represented in Figure 7. For the purposes of illustration, let us assume that this force field represents members of a group who are discussing a relevant issue and that two positions on the issue may be readily identified, one advocated by a majority of the group members and the other advocated by a minority. Let us assume further that one or more group members belong to neither the majority nor the minority and may be classified, at least initially, as independent (e.g., newcomers to the group, group members whose initial attitude on the issue in question is neutral). This force field, then, is comprised of three units: majority members (M), minority members (m), and independents (I). In the example depicted in Figure 7, a single individual holding independent status is confronted by a majority of five and a minority of two.

As illustrated by the arrows connecting these units one to another, each unit is a potential source of influence for the other two, as well as a potential recipient of influence from the other two. The magnitude of the influence pressure that each unit exerts on the others will be a function of the strength, immediacy, and number of individuals in that subgroup. Additionally, as the size of any subgroup increases, the principle of marginally decreasing impact suggests that the additional influence pressure generated by each new member will be less than that of the previous member.

Furthermore, the people in each unit may be affected by others in that unit as well as by those in other units. This possibility is represented in Figure 7 by the arrow indicating the reciprocal impact of the two minority members. The impact an individual

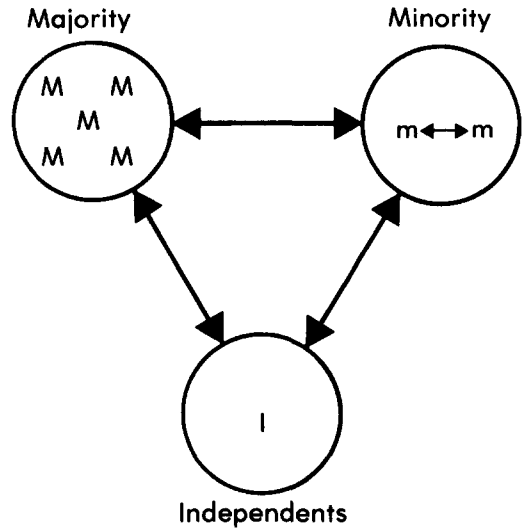


Figure 7. A generalized social force field. (M = majority members, m = minority members, and I = independents. (Adapted from "Social impact theory and group influence" by B. Latané and S. Nida. In P. Paulus (Ed.), *Psychology of Group Influence*, Erlbaum, 1980. Reprinted by permission.)

experiences from others in his own unit may be in the form of a direct influence attempt. For example, influence by a subgroup may lead to the acceptance of new arguments supporting its position on the issue or to a polarization of the subgroup's opinion.

Alternatively, the impact an individual experiences from others in his own unit may be indirect, in the form of a diffusion of impact by the other units. That is, influence pressure from others will be divided among the subgroup members, so that each individual member will feel less pressure than he would if he were alone. The ability of a subgroup to influence its own members—or to diffuse or resist influence pressure from outside—will be a function of the strength, immediacy, and number of its members.

It should be noted that this is only one example of a generalized social force field. The field may consist of only two units, as when every group member belongs to either the majority or the minority, or, more familiarly, when there is no minority position represented (e.g., when an individual target confronts a unanimous majority). In this case, the force attributable to the missing unit will be zero. Similarly, the field may be comprised of more than three units, as when

multiple positions on an issue are plausible. In the case of group members discussing a relevant issue, in fact, the number of units in the force field will correspond precisely to the number of discrete positions advocated by the group members.

It may be noted parenthetically that Figure 7 depicts the social force field operating in an experiment by Moscovici, Lage, and Naffrechoux (1969). In that study, each naive subject was brought together with five other subjects and two confederates to make judgments concerning the color of each of a series of blue slides. There are two ways to view this situation from the perspective of the subject, depending upon the confidence with which he holds the majority position and his perceived relationship to the other naive subjects. In one case, the subject may view himself as independent and as the lone target of forces generated by the other group members (he would be represented in Figure 7 by the single I). From this perspective, the other naive subjects who correctly label the slides as "blue" constitute a majority, whereas the confederates who label the slides as "green" constitute a minority. The total impact experienced by the subject in this case should be a function of the majority's impact *minus* that of the minority. In the second case, the subject may view himself as a member of the majority and as the target of forces coming from the minority (he would be represented in Figure 7 by a sixth M and the force attributable to the subgroup of independents would be zero). In this case, the total influence pressure experienced by the subject should be a function of the minority's impact *divided* by that of the majority.

Scope of the model. While social impact theory offers a broad and descriptive, yet precise and testable, model of social influence, the model does not specify when or where social influence will occur, nor does it detail the exact processes by which social influence is transmitted (Latané, 1981). Rather, it provides general rules that determine the magnitude of influence when it does occur and is most useful when combined with specific theories relevant to each area of application.

Social impact theory focuses on variables

affecting the strength, immediacy, and number of sources and targets of influence, and does not itself predict the effect of variables involving the judgmental issue (e.g., stimulus ambiguity, task difficulty, opinion relevance, etc.) nor those concerning the persuasive message (e.g., opinion discrepancy, primacy and recency effects, one-sided vs. two-sided arguments, fear appeals, etc.). Kelman (1958) has suggested that influence can best be understood in terms of three distinct psychological processes—compliance, identification, and internalization—which differ with respect to their antecedent conditions and behavioral consequences. Similarly, Moscovici (Moscovici, 1980; Moscovici & Lage, 1976; Moscovici & Personnaz, 1980) has distinguished manifest from latent (i.e., a change in the cognitive-perceptual code underlying an overt response) influence and has proposed that while majorities produce the former, minorities produce the latter. This proposition, however, has not been supported by recent evidence (Doms & Van Avermaet, 1980; Sorrentino, King, & Leo, 1980). Social impact theory does not make differential predictions for these mechanisms or processes, nor does it specify when the public or overt expression of an opinion will become private or internalized.

Conclusions

Social Influence as a Unitary Concept

The present analysis suggests that minority influence is governed by the same principles and mediated by the same variables as majority influence, the difference between the two sources of influence being purely quantitative.

The theoretical advantage of viewing majority and minority influence as instances of a general influence process is both parsimony and the ability to account for a wide range of influence phenomena. More importantly, however, this formulation considers the individual and the group as adaptive social agents. An individual may change his mind, move from one position on an issue to another, without having to engage in a new psychological process and without disrupting

the ongoing influence process in the group. Further, neither the majority nor the minority is viewed as the passive recipient of social forces from the other faction. Whatever position an individual assumes with respect to a given issue, he will be an active participant in the influence process. From this perspective, the influence of majorities and minorities is simultaneous and reciprocal.

Finally, the present formulation views social influence as only one example of the wide variety of effects that the presence or actions of other people have on a target person. By analyzing the influence situation in terms of a social force field, social impact theory helps to integrate research on social influence with the vast body of research on other social phenomena such as bystander intervention, responses to crowding, productivity in groups, and so forth.

Relationship of Social Impact Theory to Previous Models

Previous models of social influence have been concerned primarily with conformity or innovation, but not both. Two models of social influence have been reviewed, each of which accounts for a portion of influence phenomena. Our purpose in the present article has not been to suggest that either model is inaccurate with respect to the type of influence it purports to explain. Rather, we have proposed a general framework by which to understand the influence of both majorities and minorities, which integrates previous theoretical formulations and empirical findings. Thus, while there are some points of disagreement, social impact theory has much in common with each of these earlier models.

Dependence models. In contrast to previous conceptions of majority influence, social impact theory suggests that influence may occur in the absence of an explicit dependence relationship between the target and source. The simple presence of an individual in a social force field insures that he will be affected, at least to some extent, by every other individual in that field and that he will simultaneously have some effect

upon each of them. Thus, we agree with Moscovici (1976) that single individuals and relatively powerless minorities must inevitably have some influence.

Variables that have traditionally been the focus of dependence models—such as majority size, status, and power—however, are at the very heart of social impact theory. Attractiveness, expertise, control over resources, and so on are strength variables in the present formulation; and variations in their magnitude should lead to corresponding changes in impact. Further, since strength is multiplicatively related to the number of influence sources and majorities are by definition more numerous, these changes should be more pronounced when the source of influence is a majority than when it is a minority. It is not surprising, therefore, that research on majority influence has emphasized the role of these variables.

Some properties of the group as an entity may also be viewed as strength variables. Consider, for example, the role that group cohesiveness might play in the generalized social force field described earlier. As the cohesiveness of the group as a whole increases, the ability of any subgroup to influence members of another subgroup should increase. Similarly, as the cohesiveness of a given subgroup increases, the ability of that subgroup to influence its own members, or to resist influence pressure from other subgroups, should increase as well (Back, 1951; Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950).

Social influence is only one of a number of possible reactions to disagreement of opinion in groups; others include communication, changes in affect, overt hostility, and rejection (Levine, 1980). In fact, studies by Schachter (1951) and Emerson (1954) have demonstrated a tendency for groups to reject a consistent deviate, especially under conditions of high group cohesiveness. In the present formulation, rejection of the minority may be viewed as an active attempt to remove the minority from the social force field and thus as a potential source of influence (cf. Wolf, 1979). Issues such as what constitutes the psychological boundary of a group (Festinger, 1950) and how others are chosen for the purposes of social comparison

(Festinger, 1954) appear to relate to the more general problem of how the area of a social force field is determined.

Finally, the present analysis suggests that whenever a majority and a minority are simultaneously present and of comparable strength (i.e., the minority does not possess special resources or power), the majority will have greater impact than the minority. In the absence of constraints from external reality, a group consensus that results from interaction between the majority and minority will remain on the majority side of the issue, although it should be less extreme than it would be if there were no minority position advocated.

Moscovici's model. Consistent with Moscovici's analysis of minority influence, social impact theory views individuals and minorities as potential sources, as well as recipients, of influence pressure. In contrast to Moscovici, however, the present formulation suggests that their impact will be proportional to their strength, immediacy, and number. It will be neither excessive nor relatively greater than that of a majority.

It is possible that a single individual may appear to exert disproportionate influence as a result of the power function relating influence to the number of influence sources. The first person in a social force field should always have the greatest impact. As minority size increases, additional minority members should have a marginally decreasing effect. It is also possible, although not well documented, that a minority may derive some strength from its deviant status. Nemeth et al. (1977) have suggested that minority size may be inversely related to attributions of confidence and commitment that, as signs of strength, may increase influence. This analysis suggests a trade-off as minority size decreases, the minority gaining in strength what it loses in numbers. Because of the multiplicative relationship between number and strength, however, the attributional advantages would have to be substantial to offset a decrease in minority size.

Much research has focused on the behavioral style of the minority. Consistent with this line of research, social impact theory suggests that greater strength or immediacy

are necessary components of successful innovation by a numerically disadvantaged minority. Behavioral style may in fact be the only means by which a powerless minority can increase its strength sufficiently to have a noticeable impact. It is not surprising, therefore, that research on minority influence has emphasized the role of this variable.

But Minorities Have Changed the World

While history is replete with examples of elite minorities who have commanded and manipulated the masses through the use of political, economic, and military might, the present formulation suggests minorities lacking such resources will have a modest impact at best. When the majority and the minority are of comparable strength and immediacy, minority impact will be manifested primarily as a reduction in conformity to the majority. From this perspective, it would be difficult to account for conversion to the minority position or for fundamental changes in the status quo. As Moscovici has clearly pointed out, however, there are many examples, past and present, of individuals and small minorities who, although lacking prestige and power, have seemingly changed the world by convincing large majorities of their views. Innovation and social change are facts of history, and it would seem that they must represent an exception to the law of majority rule and thus to the predictions of social impact theory.

We would argue that the apparent ability of a minority to produce conversion, or a complete abdication of the majority position, under certain circumstances actually derives from the pervasive influence of the majority. Often social influence processes are sufficiently powerful that members of the majority keep each other from noticing fundamental changes in the underlying structure of affairs. In the face of changing times and conditions, majorities continue to convince each other of truths of the past, whereas minority positions may be fresher, more elegant or realistic than those of the outmoded majority. The insistent behavior of the minority thus forces the majority to attend to the discrepancy between its position and the

current state of the world, creating the conditions for a profound and often rapid change in the status quo. Thus, the minority may serve mainly as a trigger to create an explosive release from the powerful conformity pressures exerted by the majority, rather than as a direct source of influence (cf. Wheeler's 1966 discussion of behavioral contagion as resulting from disinhibition). We suggest that opinion conversion takes place only when the minority position is inherently and demonstrably more correct than that of the majority. Like the child who first remarked on the Emperor's lack of clothes, non-elite minorities may be effective mainly when majorities have blinded themselves to naked reality. If the Emperor were in fact dressed, the child would, of course, be ignored.

Reference Notes

1. Doms, M. *Moscovici's innovation effect: Towards an integration with the conformity effect*. Paper presented at the International Congress of Psychology, Leipzig, East Germany, 1980.
2. Latané, B., & Davis, D. *Social impact and the effect of majority influence on attitudes toward news media*. Unpublished manuscript, 1974.
3. Davis, D., & Latané, B. *Minority vs. majority influence and impression formation*. Unpublished manuscript, 1974.

References

- Allen, V. L. Situational factors in conformity. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 2). New York: Academic Press, 1965.
- Allen, V. L. Social support for nonconformity. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 8). New York: Academic Press, 1975.
- Allen, V. L., & Levine, J. M. Consensus and conformity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1969, 5, 389-399.
- Asch, S. E. Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In H. Guetzkow (Ed.), *Groups, leadership and men*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Carnegie Press, 1951.
- Asch, S. E. *Social psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1952.
- Asch, S. E. Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs*, 1956, 70(9, Whole No. 416).
- Back, K. Influence through social communication. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1951, 46, 9-23.
- Darley, J. M., & Darley, S. A. Conformity and deviation. In J. W. Thibaut, J. T. Spence, & R. C. Carson (Eds.), *Contemporary topics in social psychology*. Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1976.
- Deutsch, M., & Gerard, H. B. A study of normative and informational social influences upon individual judgment. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1955, 51, 629-636.
- Doms, M., & Van Avermaet, E. Majority influence, minority influence and conversion behavior: A replication. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1980, 16, 283-292.
- Emerson, R. M. Deviation and rejection: An experimental replication. *American Sociological Review*, 1954, 19, 688-694.
- Festinger, L. Informal social communication. *Psychological Review*, 1950, 57, 271-282.
- Festinger, L. A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 1954, 7, 117-140.
- Festinger, L., Schachter, S., & Back, K. *Social pressures in informal groups: A study of human factors in housing*. New York: Harper, 1950.
- Gerard, H. B., Wilhelmy, R. A., & Conolley, E. S. Conformity and group size. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1968, 8, 79-82.
- Goldberg, S. E. Three situational determinants of conformity to social norms. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1954, 49, 325-329.
- Jones, E. E., & Gerard, H. B. *Foundations of social psychology*. New York: Wiley, 1967.
- Kelman, H. C. Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1958, 2, 51-60.
- Kidd, J. S. Social influence phenomena in a task-oriented group situation. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1958, 56, 13-17.
- Kiesler, C. A., & Kiesler, S. B. *Conformity*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.
- Latané, B. Psychology of social impact. *American Psychologist*, 1981, 36, 343-356.
- Latané, B., & Nida, S. Social impact theory and group influence: A social engineering perspective. In P. B. Paulus (Ed.), *Psychology of group influence*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1980.
- Levine, J. M. Reaction to opinion deviance in small groups. In P. B. Paulus (Ed.), *Psychology of group influence*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1980.
- Moscovici, S. *Social influence and social change*. London: Academic Press, 1976.
- Moscovici, S. Toward a theory of conversion behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 13). New York: Academic Press, 1980.
- Moscovici, S., & Faucheux, C. Social influence, conformity bias, and the study of active minorities. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 6). New York: Academic Press, 1972.
- Moscovici, S., & Lage, E. Studies in social influence III: Majority versus minority influence in a group. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1976, 6, 149-174.
- Moscovici, S., Lage, E., & Naffrechoux, M. Influence of a consistent minority on the responses of a majority in a color perception task. *Sociometry*, 1969, 32, 365-379.

- Moscovici, S., & Nemeth, C. Social influence II: Minority influence. In C. Nemeth (Ed.), *Social psychology: Classic and contemporary integrations*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974.
- Moscovici, S., & Personnaz, B. Studies in social influence V: Minority influence and conversion behavior in a perceptual task. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1980, 16, 270-282.
- Nemeth, C., Swedlund, M., & Kanki, B. Patterning of the minority's responses and their influence on the majority. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1974, 4, 53-65.
- Nemeth, C., Wachtler, J., & Endicott, J. Increasing the size of the minority: Some gains and some losses. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1977, 7, 15-27.
- Rosenberg, L. A. Group size, prior experience, and conformity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1961, 63, 436-437.
- Schachter, S. Deviation, rejection, and communication. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1951, 46, 190-207.
- Sorrentino, R. M., King, G., & Leo, G. The influence of the minority on perception: A note on a possible alternative explanation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1980, 16, 293-301.
- Stevens, S. S. *Psychophysics: Introduction to its perceptual and social prospects*. New York: Wiley, 1975.
- Wheeler, L. Toward a theory of behavioral contagion. *Psychological Review*, 1966, 73, 179-192.
- Wolf, S. Behavioral style and group cohesiveness as sources of minority influence. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1979, 9, 381-395.
- Wolf, S., & Latané, B. If laboratory research doesn't square with you, then Qube it: The potential of interactive TV for social psychological research. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1981, 7, 344-352.

Received August 19, 1980

Revision received April 22, 1981 ■

Hoffman Appointed Editor, 1983-1988

The Publications and Communications Board of the American Psychological Association announces the appointment of Martin L. Hoffman, University of Michigan, as Editor of *Psychological Review* for a six-year term beginning in 1983. As of January 1, 1982, manuscripts should be directed to:

Martin L. Hoffman
 Editor, *Psychological Review*
 Department of Psychology
 University of Michigan
 3433 Mason Hall
 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

Manuscript submission patterns on *Psychological Review* make the precise date of completion of the 1982 volume uncertain. Therefore, authors should note that although the current editor, William K. Estes, will receive and consider manuscripts through December 31, 1981, should the 1982 volume be completed before that date, Estes will redirect manuscripts to Hoffman for consideration for the 1983 volume.